



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

CAN AN OBJECT LOVE?

*A philological essay
on female subjectivity*

ELLEN
SÖDERBLOM SAARELA

CAN AN OBJECT LOVE?

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Series Editor's Preface

Philologists not only investigate, but also tell the story of philology – this loving study of the words, the texts, the narratives of the past. Every instance of philological research is accordingly part of its history and we, as philologists, travel along and with the words, perhaps never fully in charge. This series started with a study of Modern Greek literature, written in French and published in 1962, and has then moved primarily back in time through various periods and kinds of texts, until the last volume (2015) landed in Homeric reception studies. In many ways, this journey is symptomatic of Greek Studies at Uppsala University, stretching from Homer to Byzantine times and often even further.

With this volume we wish to introduce new and wider perspectives and call attention to our own role as readers and scholars. Because philology, as any reading practice, is situated – in our minds, our bodies, and the world we live in. We can strive for accuracy and objectivity, but we also need to accept that situatedness. Such an approach, long overdue, has rather recently been adapted in a new form usually called autotheory: personal and yet critical readings of (most often) historical works, practiced by thinkers and writers such as Hélène Cixous in her *Mother Homer is Dead* (*Homère est morte*, 2014) and Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* (2015). Autotheory challenges our own position as scholars and pressing contemporary social and political concerns such as women's subjectification and objectification, embodiment, feminism, and neo-liberalism. Re-reading the classics from different perspectives is both vital and unavoidable in a modern world. It is necessary for the survival of the classics, and maybe for our intellectual survival as well.

INGELA NILSSON

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BUT COMPARED WITH OTHERS, I AM WAY MORE HONEST WHILE I LIE. FOR I TELL YOU THIS TRUE THING, AND THAT IS THAT I LIE. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT, BY AGREEING THAT IN NO WAY DO I SPEAK THE TRUTH, I CAN ALREADY FLEE FUTURE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST ME FROM OTHERS.

Lucian, *True History*

Katabasis

The past and the future merge to meet us here.

– Beyoncé, *Lemonade*

What Persephone would say when they came to bring her back up

I'M WAITING FOR the subway. It's spring 2018; we're lucky with the weather. The sun is shining; it's getting warmer fast these days. We're in April, reaching towards May. The sun is shining, but not where I'm standing, still, waiting. In Stockholm, many underground subway stations are constructed by Man having drilled through mountains. A specific style of this city is to let the bedrock remain untouched, exposed. Crude and unfinished. The broken is the aesthetic. As if the drill had just passed through the mountain, only to leave it in its fragmented state. That's where I am. I live close to the Stadion subway station. To reach it, I take the escalator down. The station is situated about 25 meters under the surface of the earth. The air is cool down here; it's easier to breath. I'm in the middle of a huge rock. Above ground, in the world, it is daylight.

We're at the peak of the #MeToo moment. For many months, the media has been occupied with nothing else. In October 2017, two public women outed two public men on their respective Instagram accounts. Although #MeToo reached beyond celebrity accusations, it's fair to say these two testimonies marked the real launch of #MeToo in Sweden.

The first man to be accused had been famous at least since my childhood. He was one of these TV personalities about whom everybody knew, whom everybody deemed good, a breezy fellow. The man was said to have, among other things, assaulted a woman on his TV show. Allegedly, he had violated her at a party, in a hot tub. He was fired from his TV show and later put on trial. He wasn't convicted.

Later that same fall, a quiet afternoon in a corner of the city, I passed him on Grevgatan, a street located in Östermalm, a wealthy old-money borough in Stockholm. A quiet street, dark sidewalks. An angular concrete mosaic. Yellow leaves falling through thick air, through a bright grey sky. An

unpleasant wind, blowing cold damp air against your face as you walk. He looked weary, uneasy. I too was weary, unhappy. I was on my way back home from therapy. Our eyes met for only a second. I was surprised to see him; he was bothered by being recognized. Both of us weary, both swallowed by #MeToo.

The second man to be accused, shortly after the first one, was a well-known journalist, a media personality of the left wing, a known feminist. He was accused of rape by a woman who was a public feminist and had lost his job at the newspaper. Later he wrote a book in which he discussed his experiences of and thoughts about #MeToo and the accusation against him. He sued his accuser for defamation, and she was found guilty in court. Then she too published a book in which she described her experience of rape and of being put on trial for speaking about it in public. The state would later file a report of defamation against her—for publishing her book. In the end she wasn't convicted.

Both these men were accused in early October 2017. The accusations made waves in the media. News articles, think pieces, every day and every genre. #MeToo grew by the second. On Facebook, one group after another was formed, mobilizing women from almost all professional sectors. The groups gathered testimonies from a seemingly endless series of women. All these stories, experiences of assault. So much sexism, right in front of our eyes, everywhere. So much pain. The daily newspapers published testimonies from the groups. All over the media it was made clear that misogyny still dominates, everywhere, even in a land where feminism is the norm, *even in Sweden*. So much hurt. It was a fall of grief, anger, and climax.

I find myself deep underground; we have reached late April 2018. Later this day, a demonstration is scheduled to take place at Stortorget, Gamla stan, the big square of the oldest city district, the literal center of Stockholm. In the fall 2017, the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* had published testimonies of eighteen women who spoke of being sexually assaulted by Jean-Claude Arnault, the husband of the poet and (then) member of the Swedish Academy Katarina Frostenson. Arnault denied the accusations but, when put on trial, was found guilty of rape and sentenced to prison. The news story had a huge impact on the Academy. Conflicts arose: some members wanted to investigate the involvement of the Academy and its resources

in the Forum club, run by Arnault and Frostenson. Other members were resistant to the media's critical examinations of the institution as well as to members' choice to succumb to the media and an angry public.

This day, in late April 2018, a demonstration is scheduled to take place at Stortorget, in front of Börshuset where the members of the Academy meet every Thursday.¹ Today is the day of their regular meeting, and, thus, of the demonstration. The Academy's (then) permanent secretary, the literary scholar Sara Danius, had initiated an independent examination of how the Academy financially may have supported the events and spaces where Arnault was accused of having committed the assaults, or within which contexts he had gained influence and, thus, his powerful position. This had caused great conflict among the members. In the newspaper, the author and Academy member Horace Engdahl, a former permanent secretary, wrote that, because of this, Danius was the worst secretary since 1786, the year of the institution's birth.² Later, on the radio, Danius said that history wouldn't treat her slanderer lightly.³ As a consequence of these controversies, Danius had announced that she'd leave her post as permanent secretary as well as her chair in the Academy. So today, later this afternoon, the demonstrators will show their support for Danius and aim their accusations at the beautiful Börshuset, right in the centre of the capital. An enraged public against a royal institution.

This morning, people have shown their support of Danius on social media *en masse*. In my Instagram feed, the images form a long row, piling up one after another in front of my eyes. Dressed in Danius' signature garment, the pussy bow, an endless number of Swedes take a stand. On my screen the bows shine so beautifully. Together the pictures become a stream, eternally flowing. Politicians are quick to join the crowd. The (then) Minister of Culture and Democracy, the Green Party's Alice Bah Kuhnke; the (then) Minister of Trade and Industry, Social Democrat Mikael Damberg; among many others—all and everyone upload a post on social media.

By now, the pussy bow has gone through a metamorphosis. Once just a piece of clothing, it has transformed into signifying something beyond its materiality. Through the blouse a symbol has taken form, used for marking your position. The garment has become a flag. Proudly they wear the blouse, letting its bow flow against their chest. Thus they demonstrate on which side

of history they stand. On the picture of her Instagram post, Bah Kuhnke stands in front of the mirror. Solemnly she ties her bow. With a big bow tied under the collar of his shirt, Damberg looks straight into the camera; he is not joking around, oh no, this is serious, this is Facebook.

The famous picture of Danius, taken as she leaves the Academy for the very last time, her shining white bow, her head held high—this picture makes history. Her bow flows gracefully in the wind as she marches over the cobblestones. Through flashes from countless cameras, you can hear the glossy laptop keys typing history.



This morning, I find myself on the subway platform. Under ground. The bedrock exposed like an open wound. Waiting for the train to arrive, I face a huge billboard of the crime-fiction novelist Jens Lapidus, with a pink screen behind him. He's dressed in a tight beige long-sleeve shirt topped by an enormous shining pussy bow of silk. Gorgeous. It's a commercial for the department store chain Åhléns. The soft pink and beige become a dreamy contrast to the crude bedrock surrounding me. Lapidus' big face, his clear blue eyes, they're looking straight at me. A billboard of beauty: silky aesthetics has found its way to this dark and dirty underworld.

Far from the sunny spring on the surface of the earth, I find myself in the cool and dark boulder. I stand on the outcome of Man's choice to drill through a big, cold rock. To blow up a mountain. A hole in the ground. I'm in the heart of a lifeless stone. Lapidus, covered in beige, shiny silk, looks at me. Waiting for my train to arrive, I apprehend that which this handsome, rich man of success has come to tell me. As it speaks to me, the pussy bow mesmerizes the stone that is my heart. Pink and beige shimmering silk meets a dark, grey rock. A core once emptied by a drill. Blown to pieces. Now silk has come to soothingly fill my echoing hole. Jupiter, Åhléns, has something to tell me. Hermes, Lapidus, has come down to my dark underworld; he has come down from above to hand me a message. From the warm sun to this chilly pit. Hypnotized by his silk bow, I listen as he leans towards me and whispers in my ear. I find myself alone within the crude bedrock, standing on the platform waiting, but the train is already here, can't I see it? It's just

waiting for me. Me? Time has come for me to hop on. Their train shall finally bring me up to their sunny, bright sky. Will their rays reheat this icy stone?



A rock, pierced through with a big fat drill. A functional rock, for the greater good, a hole. Mankind needs its wound. The city is built through and on the wound that it made. A tunnel through which life is transported. All those lives, all those destinies. Two million individuals. All inside the same single hole in the ground. A medium, a placeholder. They pass through the underworld, only to be brought back up again. Like nothing ever happened. They pass through the broken stone and reach the other side. Enter the wound, rush through it without taking notice, leave it as it was. Thus, they find their way back home.

In sunny April 2018, my heart has since long become a cold, grey rock. An eternity and one second. A hole has replaced my core. Shock, depression, therapy. An infinite hopelessness.

Standing in the cold quietness of waiting, I know that I should hop on. I should let Lapidus' beige silk bow lead me to his beautiful brightness. Aesthetics, industry, a powerful message against chaos; a mind and a body in complete disorientation, inconsolably broken. A billboard in Hades. Movement faced with alienation. But even if I would want to take their message to me, how would I go about it? In one second, everything is lost, blown to pieces. I can't reach the rays of sun from their spring above. It is all too late. Forever a cold rock, I'm a hole.

Sunny April, 2018, I'm exhausted. And yet, later this day I will stand there with them, the crowd at Stortorget, confronting the Academy members who, in the public eye, have become symbols of misogyny, sexism, the old and stinky. They, *les Anciens*, we, *les Modernes*. The silk pussy bow shines white as it flows in the evening wind, a historical moment. #MeToo in the peak of its glory. Me too? Yeah, right.

A revolutionary love

SOME TIME BEFORE that silky bow had confronted me in the underworld, I had swiftly made my way along Valhallavägen, an esplanade in Östermalm, towards the bus stop one early evening. I was charged with expectations. I was about to meet him, he whom I'd later call my boyfriend. But now he was merely a new acquaintance. I was smitten. The air was freezing, a pit-black sky. It was the sort of coldness that doesn't materialize in snow or rain. It was the kind of coldness whose pining wind feels like ice beneath the skin. Under my wool coat, the cold had frozen my limbs into ice cubes. A big, knitted golden scarf laid around my neck and tumbled down over my shoulders. In the already darkness of this yet early evening, my scarf shone bright. My breath formed small, white clouds. I felt a quickening in my steps. In my stomach, butterflies. I was nervous, about to be sick. It was the first time that this man was going to be in my home. I had blow-dried my bleached blond hair, in admiration of Marilyn Monroe. I wore a black mini skirt with braces, under which I wore a silky, shining, pink long-sleeved shirt, tight. I felt pretty enough. Something big was about to happen, I knew it, I felt it in my body. We were so alike, he and I.

In the past, my life had always been caught in the grip of passivity. Always. I'd been stuck inside an inability to devote myself. I had not found it in me to dare hearing my emotions. So much shame, resulting in fear. Now, finally, at the end of my twenties, I pursued my desire. This had been an active choice. I had reached an insight about my fear of being an active, desiring person in my own life. I realized that nobody would come and fix my life, no one else but me. Nobody else could take responsibility for my happiness. What was I waiting for? What did I expect would happen? Who would save me, if not me?

Therefore, initiatives and openness had ceased to be scary to me. Instead, I now held these things as inescapable parts of life, without which life couldn't be deemed as fully lived. Relational dependence I now defined as

a virtue. To me, vulnerability was something beautiful, if not sacred. I had had to learn this. I had educated myself to dare, to actively reach myself outwards, to aim towards whatever I wished to grasp. To be fair, this education had caused me a broken heart, but I was living, wasn't I? And life is full of emotions. I was living, finally, because I had allowed myself to do so. Without having spent a single moment in therapy, I had managed to turn myself into my own self-help guru. I was pleased and proud of my active self-fulfillment. I experienced myself to be in touch with my body, it felt life affirming. Tired of my passivating fear, I had taken charge of my life. I'm not going to lie—I made a fool of myself more often, but I was happy more often too. My agency strengthened my self-esteem. I was no longer too scared to feel.

From a retired couple I rented a furnished, small, one bedroom apartment in a quiet corner of fancy Östermalm. In a small house in the backyard of the building, a house with a patio. I lived on the top floor. There was one apartment on each floor. A secluded tower in the middle of the city. From my tower, I could look out over the patio. Although Stureplan, the party district, was but some streets from here, the city noise didn't reach me. Would I choose not to look at the time, I could imagine that it didn't pass. The sun went up and down, but other than that everything stayed the same. Here, all the way up in my hidden backyard tower, I was completely secluded.

We were in my apartment. It was the first time. I showed him around, quickly—there wasn't much to show. Suddenly he threw me on my bed, he smiled. I was surprised by the initiative; I welcomed it. He kissed me. He twisted and turned my body, as if he inspected it. I marveled. He laid on top of me, bent my knees, checked the different parts of my body. I was moved here and there. He was a good kisser. I felt it as if I were that Barbie doll that does aerobics, the one I had as a kid: her limbs were so flexible, you could move them however you liked. He kissed me; he told me my body was good. I hadn't experienced this before, but what did I know about life? It was a lustful person lying on that bed, one who wanted to allow herself to be open and happy.

It was a trivial event, that evening, and yet, in hindsight, I would see it more clearly. I'd understand it better in the after. In my mind, we had experienced intimacy together for the first time. He had confirmed my body. The confirmation worked as a powerful ruse. He had laid himself on top of me.

He was taller than me, he was heavier. With the weight of his body covering all of me I felt us getting closer. He could have suffocated me.

When I read Märta Tikkanen I burst into tears—"The thought / of all women / in all times who have experienced this second"⁴—I put the book away. For never do I remember his face as clearly as in that very second. In memories where I miss him, his hair is thick and curly, framing a friendly face. I miss that smile—the smile at the café, the trespass, the street corner. I used to pull my fingers through that hair, I followed the curls to their tips. The fresh feeling of his hair against my fingers, the scent of newly-washed hair. Our ties have long since been cut, yet still he tends to meet me. In that second his hair is out of focus. His face isn't covered, his eyes are big. He makes a different smile. Have you ever experienced the seconds of strategic planning? The seconds before, when you formulate a tactic in order to give him as little as possible? You're a free human being, you aren't powerless, you're an inviolable subject. So you deliberate your options. Big blue eyes. You have one second, one long second. How do you want to break?

That spring, I took a doctoral course in philosophy. The course was about love. In the course we went through philosophical perspectives on love through history. The course exam was to write a paper. I wrote about Plato's view on love, and how, as Gregory Vlastos argues, this view is egocentric in its very essence.⁵ Accordingly, the loving subject loves a beloved object. The object becomes a surface for projecting the qualities that the subject deems desirable. The lover loves ideas of beauty and goodness, rather than another human being who is worth loving *for who they are*. Loving inevitably results in objectification. The subject aspires for beauty and goodness, and thus uses a human being, who becomes a placeholder for these abstract qualities that the subject values. Not yet sunny April 2018. Not yet the fall of testimonies 2017. Almost, but not just yet.

I was in love with a man. He was my boyfriend. He was a PhD student like me. We connected; it thrilled me. All those talks. We shared values. We got each other. He had voted for the Feminist Party, but other than that we

were in sync. He seemed to have some fear of being coupled up, of having his autonomous independence threatened. Secure in my own emotion, I didn't let it stress me. His worried reactions to my initiatives would, nonetheless, put our harmony to the test. I expressed expectations, he panicked. Calm down, said I. I didn't see my subjectivity as a problem, but to him it was a challenge. It feels as if you have expectations, he'd tell me, and I didn't see the problem. Was I not supposed to?

Can an object love? The question formed the title of my examination paper. I wrote about Plato's egocentric concept of love, but my interest lay in the perspective of the beloved, the perspective of the object. Inside me, my emotions fought for air. I was a body filled with affect. Now, when he texted me, my body reacted by shaking. I saw his messages popping up on my computer screen while doing a presentation in my love course, and my body responded with stress. At the same time as I, in all my body, wanted to buck, run off and shut down, I held a presentation at the university about the philosophy of love in the works of Jane Austen.

In my examination paper, I responded to Plato based on, among others, the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin. I confronted Plato's unconditional objectification by reasoning over the consequences of dehumanization. But that object, I desperately objected, doesn't it desire too? How is the placeholder's voice channeled? "Dehumanization is real. It happens in real life."⁶ I found respite reading Dworkin. She was furious, which in me awoke a sense of security. I was shaking with emotion. I was on my way out. She was so angry at men's violence against women, at rape as a phenomenon, all of which are rooted in dehumanization. "We say that women are objectified," Dworkin wrote. "We hope that people will think that we are very smart when we use a long word. But being turned into an object is a real event [...]. You are turned into a target."⁷ The target, the placeholder, the object is made of flesh. My emotions were speaking, a desperate subjectivity was shaking. It was breakable, it was rock hard.

I haven't kept my examination paper. I guess it's for the best. That paper had nothing to offer the world. And still my investigation was true. I was desperately seeking answers. I was an object, that's what he had told me. I was an object that he could hit. He said look at me, so I looked into his eyes when he hit me. I broke. You're a thing, he said, and he told me to admit it.

Would I not say I was an object, a thing, he'd hit me again. I couldn't look away. His shiny blue eyes drilled their way through my deepest core. I saw into his eyes, broken. "Can an Object Love?" formed my paper's title and I passed the course, but no answers were found. Being turned into an object is a real event. Could I love? In the moment when he took from me my humanity, where did I go?



Being hit is an experience that isn't easily translated into words. Verbal wit can't reach it. Being hit hurts. It generates a sensation on your skin. My cheek was burning. He didn't want to. It was for me that he hit me.

The threat that lies in the pain of a hit is revolutionary. I hadn't been prepared. Silly me, I had cherished my vulnerability. I had gone out in the world, taking charge of my life. I had allowed myself to dare to reach out towards whatever I wished to grasp. I had been naïve, gullible, I had wanted to live. If I didn't take care of my happiness, who would? I was a desiring subject. I didn't see it coming.

The first hit puts you in shock. In one second everything is lost. The room shifts, becomes new. Safety is replaced with hostility. The one you love embodies threat. The first hit shakes the concepts all up. Malevolence finds its way into love. Threat finds its way into your safe space. The first hit broke me, the second hit too. The third, the fourth. Violence is an efficient form of communication. With one blow, everything you once thought is overthrown. Thank me for hitting you, he said. So I thanked him lest he'd hit me. Violence is very educational. A 7.5-credit course in the philosophy of love. I passed the course. I learned to mute my expectations, what violence was, and that I was someone you could hit.

When the world is twisted the concepts are overturned. When the one you love hits you and says that it's good that you're being hit confusion emerges. I was open to love. He felt right for me, we were so alike. We talked to each other about our dissertations. We could talk for hours. I bragged about those talks to my friends. To me, those talks were the ultimate form of intimacy. We were each other's equals. I felt like Simone de Beauvoir; he was my Jean-Paul Sartre. Later, when he told me that he'd leave me and our long talks with a pounding headache I was hurt to my core. Knowing that my

expressions awoke such an aversion within him tormented me with a sharp pain. Absolute darkness. I felt sad, I didn't get it. I love those talks, I replied.



Single again. Some time had passed. Secluded in the top of my backyard tower, I lay on my bed. I looked out my window; it was dusk. If I didn't do my walks along the island Djurgården, if I wasn't needed, obliged to be present somewhere, on my bed was where you'd find me. Heavy and immobile, attached to the mattress. I couldn't think of doing anything, had no force to. The idea of doing anything other than lying on my bed never struck me. I cried a lot.

Now, again, apathetically lying with all my weight. Single in the big city, was I Carrie Bradshaw? I turned my head towards the window. I knew that in this little apartment he had hit me. As I now had freed myself from his presence, this knowledge was difficult to absorb. I knew it was wrong of him to hit me: my friends had told me so. And I knew. It was too much to grasp. I couldn't allow myself to understand that it had happened and that I had taken it. I tried to remember, but my brain was blocked. Not this again, I whined. I closed my eyes, tight, tried to remember, but my head was a Teflon pan, every attempt to get in ran off. I didn't master my memories. An inconsolable puzzlement.

Slowly, I moved my hand towards my cheek. I lay it softly there. The second that my palm touched my cheek I burst into tears. My body couldn't escape that which my brain wouldn't realize. At the top of my quiet tower, I couldn't stop crying. My body had turned the incomprehensible concrete. In my muscles vibrated still a sensation of threat.

I looked outside my window, at the sunset. It was always so quiet, the patio. Alone, at the top of my backyard tower, I lay on my bed. Although in the city center, up here, it was so calm, so silent. Time stopped. My world was broken. A short romance, *The Love Story of the Century*:

and yet
it is hard to understand
impossible to forget⁸

Secluded at the top of my backyard tower, I found myself thrown out from time.

Whirling leaves

*Even to such changes shall I come.
Though shrunk past recognition of the eye,
still by my voice shall I be known,
for the fates will leave me my voice.*

– The sibyl of Cumae to Aeneas in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Leaves

THE SIBYL IN Cumae is a prophet. She writes her visions on leaves. In her cave, she lays out the leaves and, thus, she lays out her vision. She arranges a tale of what shall come, composes a narrative. Would the wind want to overthrow her arrangement, she wouldn't help to restore its past order. Despite her careful arrangement, to the world her voice isn't accessible in the shape of a stylistic narrative. You find yourself there in the cave, in a huge pile of leaves. Words up to your knees, still no sense of meaning. The truth is there, but no one helps you to grasp it. Instead, on your own, you must interpret the meaning. Today you might have said something like it's not the sibyl's job to educate those who want to know their fate. You alone are responsible for finding your way in this world. Alone in her echoing cave the sibyl is a real *queen*. In the sibyl's cave, you find yourself covered with leaves that tell you something about your life, but that have been caught by a windy chaos. If it's a stylized story you're after, you'll have to keep looking.

I thought I'd just lie here. On the bed of my friend's beach house, in quiet. Eyes closed. Hear the water outside as it hits the rocks. Be, as they say, mindful. Rest in the moment. Land, basically. I'm twisting. Playing some music. I want to be distracted by something. I want to write something on Facebook. I want to be on that meta level. Instead of—what? I don't even know. I'm a bit sun-struck. I was lying in the fetal position on the deck chair. I'm relaxing. I'm enjoying summer. I feel gratitude. Towards the weekend. Towards my paycheck. Towards the sky! On my way out to the countryside a fox appeared; it ran across the meadow towards the highway. It was so cute. I think it was a fox? Big eyes. A kind face. How often do you see foxes? Last Wednesday, at the train station, I saw a rat. The fox headed towards me but the bus was going too fast. I'll try to close my eyes now. Listen to the water when it hits the rocks. Take in the mo-

ment. Breath in. Breath out. Mindful. The water is reflected against the ceiling. The waves' glittery sparkle. I have turned off the music. I have a blanket. The summer is hot. I've been burned. I'm warm by the blanket. It's pleasant. I know it is, but I don't feel it.

I have never written as much as when I went through a trauma. And you should know I've always written. A lot. I wrote notes on my old Huawei, my iPod, anything at all, just like the passage above. That one I wrote a few weeks into my crisis. Dazed, bleary, awake among the ruins that were my life. I wrote logs, like a medical file, I registered in real time the process that I experienced. I wrote an abundant amount of text messages to my friends, I tried to explain to them, defend myself to them, to myself, I tried to map what had happened, what I'd been through, what I went through, who I was. I wrote in the Wordfeud chat to my game buddy. I created a semi-secret Instagram account, open only to my closest circle. There I wrote my journal, in which I formulated my experience of being dropped in the unknown. I formulated my crisis in words, categorized my chaos in a syntactic order. To my little notes I attached pictures of swans and icons from a church in Gothenburg. Was I making them uncomfortable? But what was I supposed to do? I knew nothing else. To be silent would be to wither. The body has to live.

I didn't understand what had happened to me, who I was, or how I'd move on. So I wrote about it. Writing was my only answer. I was overwhelmed. All I could do was write *it* down. The experience, the reality, the memories, the pain, the tears, the monotonous walks along the deserted streets of Östermalm. Careful that it should remain transparent and honest, I constantly watched over my writing. Determined, I refused myself any sign of poetization, that the form would precede the words. When I found myself having put a repertoire together, I immediately stopped writing. Unreservedly, everything had to be verbalized through a straight path from within, without any detours. For me it was essential that everything I wrote was *truth*; every word, every syllable, every space. I blogged. I wrote opinion pieces and essays in the newspaper. The world was not in sync with my experience of living in it. I searched for resonance. Upwards from below, I wrote on the last pages of my work pad. I had lost structure, I had lost form. There

I wrote the memories that were piercing through as I tried to hear an archeologist present his research. A good girl, I sat quiet in the aula, unnoticeably writing down every assault. I was subjugated to my body. It did the best it could. Now it had me remember that which my brain didn't always allow me to. My dissertation sounded angrier nowadays. Aware of how someday I might find myself back in normality, I listened to my body. Only my body I trusted. One day my memory would start failing me. So I wrote when I remembered, aware of how one day I may need these leaves. My words gave my experience a place in the world.

But my words combined with the world formed my life's tragedy. My words were my experience, but my experience placed me in an inevitable conflict. The world was in harmony as long as my words didn't question it. And I couldn't have wanted anything more than just to agree with the world. The problem was that my body was incapable of silencing its words. I could no longer fight it. The world denied me. At the same time the instinct through my whole body said that I must be allowed to exist.

Nonetheless, I knew myself well enough to know that one day I'd start questioning myself, as I always do. Now, I protected myself from my self-hate. I knew I loved writing, so I was careful to avoid the risk of narrativizing the new being. This was no pleasant storytelling, no moving talk with Oprah. My life is not inspiring. With meticulous honesty as my only style-guide, I wrote everything down. Nothing mattered but the truth.

But let's be real, there was no need for my worries. I had no control over the story this time. There was no narrative under which I could take cover. I didn't own this self-presentation. I had no self to present. For me there was no way out, so I wrote. I didn't write myself free. I was lost and no narratorial technique in the world could have saved me.

For I was crushed in a thousand pieces. I had to pick myself up, become whole. But how? How to make whole what isn't even here? I wrote tons of words, all the time, for me and for others, I filed a report of the chaos that was my existence. All I knew was that my experience was true and that it had to be allowed to exist. My body was pounding. I was so tired. All these words, spread in all those forms and genres. All these threads, all these documents, together they formed one big mess and that mess was me. My *I* was dissolved into an unbounded mass. I was fragments without structure. I was

so far from whole. A narrative? Looking back, the thought of it makes me smile. If only. I was an overthrown bundle of leaves. I was passages of words and sentences that lacked their narrative, that lacked something that they had never owned.



In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the hero Aeneas is helped by the sibyl in his search for Hades, the underworld. The sibyl stands on the threshold between life and death. She leads him down. It's easy to go down, she tells him. There's nothing impressive about digging deeper into the darkness. The difficulty lies in getting up again after having seen the abyss, to once again find brightness. The gates of Hades are open, the sibyl says. All that remains is taking that step. The great task lies in finding the path back up afterwards, in finding a way out of the underworld. The challenge is to be able to enjoy fresh air and a clear sky, having once seen the darkness.



I was lying on the bed at my friend's beach house. The summer heat burned outside, as did my skin in there, drenched in sun. I was lying on the deck chair by the cliff in the fetal position. I was so quiet during that period. Don't you want to come out to the country, she had asked me again. A friendly voice, a sense of security. I hesitated; I had an aversion to social gatherings. I was so boring. I was no longer entertaining company, no fun. I had nothing to offer anyone. My insides kept me constantly tired. Yet her warm voice had me softening, so I went. Out in the countryside, as I rested on the bed, I forced myself to listen to the water when it hit the rocks. I didn't allow myself any distractions, I refused to escape to the meta level, to hide under that old intellectualizing jargon. I wanted to stop fleeing that which I couldn't flee. I was burning up that warm summer's day. I pulled the wool blanket over me. I had it cover me from head to toe. What if it could, as if by magic, make me disappear?

I knew that in reality the blanket was too warm. It wasn't in sync with the season. It didn't resonate with the current time's close distance between the earth and the sun. On an intellectual level, I understood that the blanket didn't belong there. I knew it was pleasant to be in the tranquility of that

summer's day. The brilliant surface of the water, shimmering, I looked up to the ceiling, it reflected the glittering lake. The water's peaceful sound paced down the tempo, slowed down time. It was nice. But I didn't feel it.

There was so much I couldn't feel. To me, emotions were unattainable. I was shut down. I had lost myself and I didn't know what remained. I didn't allow myself to feel it. Terrified of the consequences of my memories, I couldn't let myself remember. I avoided the breaking point on which I constantly balanced. If I broke, what would happen to me? Would I explode, turn into a monster? Would I disappear?

I tried to force myself to be present there in the beach house, for all I wanted was to feel presence again. I wanted to feel as if my feelings weren't a problem. All I wanted was to be normal again. I wanted to be intact. I wanted to be a person who feels the warmth of the blanket as it touches her sunburned skin and who reacts to it. I was shut down. And yet I was a stain that I was incapable of washing off myself. I laid on the bed, stiff. I balanced on that breaking point. The audience held their breath, would she make it? And if she fell, what would happen? I was shut down with my life at stake. Passivity held me where I lay. I was afraid of the unknown. Afraid of what would happen, had I dared to feel.



The sibyl writes and writes on her leaves. She writes and sorts her writing. Carefully, she lays out her vision. Over there, deep inside her cave, she piles up her thoughts. On fallen leaves, one after the other. She reaches after that which may channel her voice. The sibyl's relation to her own voice is irrational. That's why it resonates with mine. From the deep, dark cave I hear a voice echoing. Determinedly, I reach for the leaves that the storm has shook up. The sibyl lives secluded. Once you've passed the swamp you'll reach her lonely cave. Yet from its deep core she seeks for contact with the world. And she gets the world to want to hear her—but then the wind passes through her sentences. With just one blow the story is gone.

Plasticity

IN *THE CAREFREE* (*De obekymrade*, 2019), Horace Engdahl describes what it means to be in love. In a narrated dialogue, a man explains to a woman that

A known author, Madame de Staël, has one of her characters say: “All that is real in this world is love.” In the most precise way, she thus captures the quality that distinguishes love: that it with its palpability makes this world of scenery true for just one moment.⁹

Filled with love’s ruse, lovers find themselves in a world far from norms and ideals, far from economic or cultural status, far from worldly aspirations. Within the lover, love awakens a different idea of truth, reality and meaning. Suddenly, struck with the poison of passion, you discern a truth that has never been verbalized. You find yourself on the outside.

Spring 2017, out in the countryside, I remember a clear blue sky. My friend and I sit on a wooden deck. I narrowly open the door to my world on the outside. I ask her, *hypothetically*, about her experiences of destructivity. What had she endured? Was she outside too? We didn’t live in one same sphere, she was intact. She was still in there, had never been thrown out. I closed my door again. We returned to the others in the cottage.

In the twelfth-century Byzantine novel *Hysmine and Hysminias* (Ἵσμινη καὶ Ἵσμινιάς) by Eumathios Makrembolites, the heroine finds herself back home, safe and sound, after having been enslaved and almost killed. All in her quest to be with her beloved. But she survived. Back in safety, back with her lover, she is asked to speak of that which she has lived on her own. Hysmine is reluctant, she doesn’t want to talk. She appropriates the dominant cultural norm that inhibits women from speaking, but the people are thirsty for her story. They crave her experience. Thus, Hysmine speaks. At sea, she was sacrificed to Poseidon during a storm:

When I was cast into the sea, a dolphin takes me on its back as it plunges through the waves and swims on lightly. I, in my nakedness, rode on the wild beast, confused by the waves and made dizzy by the sea, and in my fear of the beast my soul was quite torn apart. The creature was my salvation, yet I thought my benefactor was my enemy; I was terrified of my saviour but loved my enemy and I entwined myself around him as though he were my saviour. Since my saviour was a wild beast, I sought to escape from him, but I dared not trust the waves, and I was buffeted by my thoughts and the waves and the creature.¹⁰

I think there's something absolutely unique in the experience of being attacked by the person you love, something that you can't put into words. In the middle of this shock, you rationalize security inside threat. Terrified in vulnerability, overthrown by waves, your soul is torn apart. I didn't tell my friend of my sphere. I feared my savior, loved my enemy. I wasn't intact, I was broken.



Subjectivity is never passivity. In the nature of the subject lies its self-realization. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel stated that the master and the slave have their identities through the dialectic relationship between them: the master is master only in his relation to the slave, the other. The master is thus dependent of the slave's confirmation of their asymmetry. Subjectivity is never static, but in constant reproduction. Catherine Malabou reads Hegel and states that subjectivity is a *plastic instance*. The subject is formed by its historical components, its positions and behaviors. Malabou argues that "plasticity thus characterizes the relation that the subject has with the accident, to that which happens to it."¹¹ Plasticity can be discerned in the subject's relation to its future. It's while gazing ahead that the subject is most alive. Hence, every subject is its own prophet. With its visions, it creates its *I*.

Spring 2018, at the women's shelter. Emptied of tears, outdone. In vain I tried to understand. It feels as if a store has been burgled during the night, I explained to my collocutor. She was someone with whom I talked, I considered her my therapist, just without the formalities. Maybe she was a therapist formally too, I don't know, it wasn't important. It's as if the shop window has

been shattered, as if it lies on the ground in the form of a million glass splinters. Broken. Nothing remains. It's impossible to comprehend. I had been there during the looting, all along, for the store was me. How could I have been there, and yet not? How could I have been awake then and yet now I had awoken from a coma? Desperately I wished that my collocutor would make graspable that which I couldn't understand. How could I understand my subjectivity? She listened to me, but she didn't have an answer. She had no other answer than that it wasn't true, that I wasn't gone. But how could I understand my agency? We looked at each other, sitting on our respective chairs face to face, another week, there in her office, a small cube in the middle of the city; yet another month had passed. How could I understand myself?

Awoke, dazed in shock, the morning after the burglary I had found myself broken and emptied. A new day, back in their world of scenery. Engdahl lets his characters converse about lovers:

- While they still haven't met love they walk around with their plans and aspirations. They recognize their social position as very important and they count their little triumphs and defeats in the war that they wage against people around them. When love comes, all this appears as shadows.

- And that's why they aren't cautious as they unexpectedly come across it? For it always seems to happen without warning ...¹²

Had I, as Engdahl puts it, "tasted a piece of reality"? "It's as if they wake up from anesthesia, as if they now first hear their name pronounced," he writes.¹³ Dazed, I met myself spread out in the shape of shattered splinters of glass. An unfamiliar, non-existent *I*. Within the idea that I was a lover, for my friend I had closed the door to my sphere. She lived in another reality. Whose was more true?

The room shifts, he changes. I interpret his frightening gaze as being poisoned with love. He has drunk ruse's potion, just like Tristan. That makes me Isolde. We embody the *Urtex*t. A reality beyond time and space. Suddenly the present is palpable. I reformulate the antagonism that seeps out through his big, blue eyes. I rationalize another reality, another love tale, another lover. I understand that we are on the outside. But then again, the grand never

remains within. That's what makes it grand. Eternity stays on the outside of their secular time laps. "For reality cannot be doubted Engdahl writes, "and the rest now appears as dusty props to a play, since long taken down."¹⁴

Bark

Straightway he burned with love; but she fled the very name of love, rejoicing in the deep fastnesses of the woods, and in the spoils of beasts which she had snared, vying with the virgin Phoebe. A single fillet bound her locks all unarranged. Many sought her; but she, averse to all suitors, impatient of control and without thought for man, roamed the pathless woods, nor cared at all that Hymen, love, or wedlock might be.¹⁵

IN *METAMORPHOSES*, OVID describes how Daphne tells her father that she wishes to live free from men. “He in the passage above, refers to the god Apollo. He chases Daphne, determined to satisfy his desires. Daphne runs, she tries to escape, but faced with the god she is inferior. In her inability to flee, she prays to higher powers that they may let her be transformed: “O father, help! if your waters hold divinity; change and destroy this beauty in which I took such pleasure.”¹⁶ Daphne’s prayer is answered. Her hair transforms into leaves, her arms into twigs, “a down-dragging numbness seized her limbs, and her soft sides were begirt with thin bark.”¹⁷ In her escape, Daphne is transformed into a tree. But Apollo’s desire remains undiminished. He takes a grip of the trunk, holds on to her twigs, “he felt the heart still fluttering beneath the bark.”¹⁸

Kathryn Mayorga states that she was raped by soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo in Las Vegas in 2009. She describes in the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* the unreal feeling at the moment when she grasped what had just happened to her, and how her life changed:

It happened so quick. I didn’t really know what happened. [...] I felt like I was actually floating almost. It felt like I wasn’t there. It was out-of-body. I really can’t describe it in words.¹⁹

Sexual abuse commonly causes the experience of leaving your body. Many describe how they see themselves from the outside, as if had their presence ceased. A metamorphosis. A flight comparable to Daphne's. You abandon your being in the past. The *I* goes through a transformation. I sound dramatic, I know. It seems to me that in conversations, texts and debates, there's a desire to end speaking of assault in such dramatic terms. There's a resistance against the tendency of describing life as over after abuse. You shouldn't, they argue, speak in a way that defines everything and your self as completely transformed. Doing so means giving the abuser too much power, an authority he doesn't deserve, it makes him mightier than he is. I get their view. It's compassionate and true to some extent. I guess.

I broke down sitting on my chair. I gave in to my inner darkness. Tears flowed freely; I hardly noticed. My eyes produced tears, effortlessly. It's the sort of weeping that emerges once all your strength has run out. I could no longer resist, found no strength left within me. I was, like life itself, outdone. My tears fell aplenty, down my cheeks; I had opened the gates to the abyss: I'm ruined. At the women's shelter my collocutor handed me a tissue and told me that that's not true, that I still remain. I really wanted to believe her. I nodded and accepted the tissue.

I don't want to be drastic, not overdramatic. I don't even agree with myself, right? They have impeccable arguments. The feminists who tell me that my life isn't over are right and they convince me. We all got baggage! My friends tell me it's just part of life.



Ovid's transformation tales narrate an external metamorphosis. Malabou shows this by pointing at the myth of Daphne and Apollo. On a fundamental level, Daphne's tragedy doesn't change her. Malabou describes identity, as it is shaped in our modern time, as plastic. With trauma, life not only changes, but so does the self. From trauma a monster emerges, a stranger, an *absolute existential improvisation*.²⁰

In the *Der Spiegel* article, Mayorga's life is described as fundamentally changed. She wishes to move on and to gain whatever ounce of recognition she deems achievable, so she signs a deal with Ronaldo's lawyers. She describes how she ended up lying on the floor, unstable, hysterical, unable

to speak. She couldn't endure any longer. Realizing that she couldn't keep fighting, she gave them her signature. In vain she tried to move on. In vain she sought for recognition. End of story, perhaps. To *Der Spiegel*, she mentions suicidal thoughts, alcohol and recurring breakdowns. Her family says that she no longer is who she once was.

When Daphne is chased by Apollo she is transformed into a tree. The bark encloses her. On the inside her heart pounds. It's still there. Daphne isn't ruined, she's a tree.

After the rape, Mayorga says they leave the bedroom and return to the rest of the group. They're in the Jacuzzi. "I was in a trance," she says. They sit down in the tub. Mayorga stares into the bubbling water. Ronaldo leaves the group and Mayorga says that "all I remember is falling into the Jacuzzi."²¹

Daphne's still there. She's not as drastic as me, not quite as dramatic. Don't give the abuser that power. Could be that the violence was meaningless. What does your identity have to do with his body? According to the settlement, *Der Spiegel* writes, Mayorga is prohibited from ever speaking of what she has experienced, she can never badmouth her rapist, not even mention him to her therapist. Ronaldo's lawyers agree to Mayorga's request to write a letter that shall be read to him. *Der Spiegel* "has obtained a copy of the letter which is almost six pages long. It is difficult to read. Essentially a long, desperate wail."²²

Powerless, lying on the floor, she has lost the ability to speak. A hysteric. The article ends by stating that Mayorga is gone. "She has quit her job at the elementary school and has indefinitely disappeared and is now in an unknown location. She is no longer reachable."²³



Like a river, life has its course. Transformations and changes follow one upon the other. They appear as consequences to one another, and then we die. Malabou writes: "Bodily and psychic transformations do nothing but reinforce the permanence of identity, caricaturing or fixing it, but never contradicting it. They never disrupt identity."²⁴

But, she claims, an accident can interrupt the identity's firmness. The subject's self-realization is a river. With trauma, a monster emerges, a stranger:

An unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbors nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. A form born of the accident, born by the accident, a kind of accident.²⁵

Here lies the plasticity of the subject. A dissolving identity.

In Ovid's tales, the metamorphosis remains on the surface, while the contemporary subject's metamorphosis reaches the core. Ovid's characters change their shape, but never the nature of their being. The transformation is Daphne's escape. In her powerlessness, changing becomes her rescue. Daphne can't escape, hence, the metamorphosis.

But for both the plastic modern subject and Daphne, transformation is a matter of destructivity. Of Daphne's former body there remains but a pounding heart. For the modern subject, the transformation's destructivity forms something new. The identity's old shape dissolves to instead open up an alterity that cannot be reconciled with what has been. The alterity doesn't follow that river along which life has its course. Daphne though, Malabou argues, keeps her sense of self through her metamorphosis. Her feminine being is saved through her transformation.



In Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A memoir of (my) body* (2017), a sexual assault is the starting point for the metamorphosis of the victim's body. Subsequently, Roxane, the narrator, makes Daphne's transformation. Like Daphne, Roxane cannot escape her violator. Beyond the freedoms of fiction, there are no metamorphoses that'll help you flee. Afterwards, she protects herself by eating. She eats much and often, builds a wall against potential enemies.

A difference between Ovid's myth and Roxane's reality is that in fiction, the victim-violator relationship is clearer and more categorical. The thirteen-year-old Roxane cannot understand that she isn't to blame for the group rape of which she was a victim.

I wish I had known that my violation was not my fault.

What I did know was food, so I ate because I understood that I could take up more space. I could become more solid, stronger, safer. I understood, from the way I saw people stare at fat people, from the way I stared at fat peo-

ple, that too much weight was undesirable. If I was undesirable, I could keep more hurt away. At least, I hoped I could keep more hurt away because in the after, I knew too much about hurt. I knew too much about hurt, but I didn't know how much more a girl could suffer until I did.²⁶

Gay's story can be interpreted as a tale of Daphne beyond poetry. She changes her external shape. Still, inside her pounds the same heart. The trauma changes Roxane's life forever; she is forever trapped in the traumatic moment. Daphne becomes a tree. Although the foliage is all that remains from what were once her curls, she still is who she was. She's still there. Along the trunk, tears fall down, the tears of someone who's gone and who's not. Roxane compares her body to a cage. She's trapped inside herself:

This is the reality of living in my body: I am trapped in a cage. The frustrating thing about cages is that you're trapped but you can see exactly what you want. You can reach out from the cage, but only so far.²⁷

Roxane's *I* isn't gone, yet it's trapped within the new, the after. The river, the subject's self-realizing course, is gone. There's no way forward along which she can wander. There's no future. There's no beauty in that, no positive lesson of hope for us to learn. The trauma is not given meaning by Gay talking about it in a talk show. Time doesn't move forward. She's trapped in the cage that is her body, her non-verbal experience. A life without a narrative.

Freedom of speech

Shock means returning to childhood. My head said one thing but my body another, first: away! Then: sleep! Then: grasp! Lastly: Say! So I met my friend and we had an ice cream—and I said. And with every word I turned more into a child. My head's utterances started to get conquered by those of my mouth. I felt them fighting each other, each waving arm. I kept saying, said said said. My body was so stiff. We took a walk, I carried my body, it hung on my collarbones. My hands held my body together, my head was directed towards the asphalt. I kept saying until every word had been let out. And when it was said it could never be unsaid. The words had left my body and I had returned to childhood. Do you want to get a coffee? I nodded. Do you want to go this way? I nodded. She led me, I followed. Back home my head was about to explode. I poured a glass of water but then I just stood frozen in the kitchenette. The existing words of my head were being replaced with the uttered words of my mouth, one after the other. I felt the combat within me. I was a child gone missing. I didn't know what was true. What was real was false, what was right was wrong and what was wrong was right. Now I know that shock is to not understand what's real. Others know without hesitating—the older ones, the adults. They don't doubt. Meanwhile you don't understand and you know that they know, they understand and consider obvious that which you don't get yourself. So I laid on my back on my bed that night and in my head I felt how one reality fought the other. And I couldn't move, and I was scared, like a child who must realize that the world may not only be good, but without knowing what's what. You need someone to explain, like when you lie in the dark in your bed when you're little. The door's slightly open and the light from the hallway trickles in. If you then

call for your mother she'll come and she'll make you feel safe. I felt my whole body that night as I lay on the bed, and I was so stiff. It had spoken to me and determined it had pushed me into a state of shock. I'm not anymore but a month ago I was a child.

This is my trauma. I experienced the metamorphosis in my body. For a long time the trauma lived within me, until I could no longer bear it. To speak was never a choice. Without me mastering them I felt my voice and words being articulated. They streamed out of me, out from my inner core, and changed the world. They threw me out from it. The articulation of my experience in words stated that the world was wrong, that he was wrong. I was not nothing. I was a subject. Saying so with my voice alienated me from language as I knew it.

In Gay's anthology *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* (2018), A. J. McKenna writes about experiencing rape. Just as Gay in *Hunger* creates a distinction between life before and after a trauma, McKenna also counts the days between the experience and recognizing what it meant, that she had been the victim of violation:

What does it say about me that I wish I could go back? Not to before it happened, though of course I wish for that. But I have gotten used to compromise, to settling for less. I would settle for going back to the way I felt sixty-four days ago. I feel weak for saying this, but I would.²⁸

In McKenna's case, there's no wish to return to the time before the trauma. That's but a hopeless longing. Here, the wish is to return to the time before recognizing the violation to have taken place. Here, the trauma is the mere recognition of having been a victim of someone else's abuse. In *Hunger*, Gay draws a line between before the trauma and after the trauma, while in *Not That Bad*, McKenna draws a line between the earlier story and the later story. For McKenna, trauma is described as the victim's involuntary relationship with the violator, to have to live with *having* a violator. From the moment of recognition, the moment when the violator is no longer excused, McKenna must forever live with having one.

Apollo's violation against Daphne causes her to be transformed into a tree. She changes through her relationship with her abuser. She flees him, but she cannot live as if he had never existed. Apollo reacts by embracing her new shape. He hugs the tree that she now, in her lack of a way out, has become. McKenna expresses a frustration towards the violator. Involuntarily connected to a trauma forever, and forever connected to a rapist:

So I, out of need for variation, name you mine:
My rapist. It feels wrong. Too intimate
somehow, suggests collusion, a joint enterprise
between us, "It takes two,"
they say, "Two, babe: me. You."
[...]
It doesn't matter if I'm one or many.
I may call you my rapist but we know that isn't true.
Whatever law or rumor says, whoever else there was,
you were never mine. You were the rapist I ran into.²⁹

Like Malabou, Gay and McKenna both illustrate how, through the trauma, the individual's existential progression explodes, resulting in a monster. Born from the accident, the monster overthrows your identity. McKenna counts backwards, to the time before. Sixty-four days ago McKenna and the abuser together tied a knot. Daphne never actively engages in a partnership with Apollo. McKenna writes about passively running into a perpetrator. A forced, intimate relationship between two parties that now have each other. To have a perpetrator who has a victim. Apollo embraces the tree whose heartbeat he senses: "Since you cannot be my bride, you shall at least be my tree."³⁰

Trauma transforms your identity. There's a before and an after. Before you are. After you're someone's victim. Someone's object. McKenna doesn't principally describe the accident itself. Rather, the pain of having to reset the course is narrated, of having to deviate from the river. The story is re-written. Words are given new meaning. The monster appears in the discharge of your identity. Once the violated stops excusing her violator, the victim recognizes that someone did not see her as a human being. She must recognize the

existence of her perpetrator, and also, thus, recognize her own victim role. There's no consensus between them, still, now they have each other. McKenna must live with the knowledge that the story is forever re-written. The river suddenly halts. Daphne's skin turns into bark.



Trauma is an unpredictable thing. Malabou describes it as unrecognizable, as something that doesn't derive from either a past or a discernible future. A trauma provokes an absolute existential improvisation. In *Hunger*, Gay writes about the experience of being raped by a friend and his friends, and in *Not That Bad*, McKenna writes about the experience of being raped by a loved one, rape inside the romance.

The narrator Roxane has her metamorphosis afterwards. She cannot change that which the boys did to her. Her protection is a construction in retrospection. The anxiety born from the fear of threat against your body leaves its trails on it. In *Hunger*, Roxane transforms her body. She gets tattoos. In the after she marks her body with patterns and motifs that she has chosen herself. She thus takes control over her new body, the body in the after.

McKenna describes the trauma of having to see yourself as forever tied together with a malevolent violator. With the trauma, McKenna must reshape a new self-identification. Love became violence. To suddenly have to be someone's victim. Passive in their unconditional relationship, the individual is forced by the perpetrator to a new identity. In the eyes of the abuser the subject becomes an object. A dialectic relationship from which there is no escape.

Something *shows itself* when there is damage, a cut, something to which normal, deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer remembers her self.³¹

Malabou's theory of plasticity speaks to our time. The intact heart that beats in the transformed, traumatized woman, in Daphne the tree, today is plastic, open to reform. From having been a heart beneath the bark, today's indi-

vidual becomes the bark. In *Hunger*, Roxane describes how she is forever affected by her trauma. She thinks of her rapist:

I wonder if he knows I think of him every day. I say I don't, but I do. He's always with me. Always. There is no peace. I wonder if he knows I have sought out men who would do to me what he did or that they often found me because they knew I was looking. I wonder if he knows how I found them and how I pushed away every good thing.³²

Forever tied to your accident, forever tied to your violator. In her protection from love's vulnerability, the narrator Roxane describes how reliving her transformative trauma now keeps her intact and protected from future threats. The metamorphosis doesn't keep her feminine being protected underneath the trunk. It forms an interruption. The traumatized woman is transformed into Ovid's bark.



In her book about #MeToo from a historical perspective, *#MeToo Cries in History: #AmINotHuman* (*Historiens #MeToo-vrå! #ärjaginteenmänniska*, 2019), the literary scholar Ebba Witt-Brattström writes about *the black hole*. In this hole, what doesn't belong in a male-dominated universe falls down: "women 'are heard' only if they stick to topics that belong to men's world view."³³ She continues, "In literature, men's habit of ignoring big parts of women's realities is a hot topic. [...] Still, in our time, women and men authors write forth different respective realities."³⁴

Once my language put the world at stake my trauma was definite. To articulate my voice meant defining him as a violator. Through the uttering of my experience his language was negated. Once I'd said what had happened to me I saw the world for what it was. It was his. Later, I'd wish that I'd been able to continue floating along the river, to continue my self-realization as if had the misfortune never happened. I experienced a transformation, it was formed as a fight for the meaning of words. All of a sudden, the river had dried up. Without any direction, I found myself lost in the dead, dry soil.

All those nights and days I lay on my bed, wishing we'd reconcile. All I wanted was to call or text him. I wanted to explain to him what had hap-

pened to me, how he'd affected me. I wanted to tell him about my metamorphosis. I wanted nothing else but that we'd reach resolution, that the battle wound end in peace. But I couldn't. Aware that in one second he could crush me, I didn't dare to call. He was the winner, I the loser. All of me was wrong, my very existence. We wouldn't reconcile, I realized. With one word, with one second of his gaze, he could eliminate me. I didn't want to have to accept that there was a person in the world who wanted to hurt me, that out there existed a human being who hated me truly, and me only.

The thought of calling filled me with shame. He despised me, was disgusted by me, hated me. I was ashamed of awaking these emotions by merely existing. I didn't know how I'd ever correct this, since I was lousy as a whole. Had I called, I would have degraded myself. Then I would have acknowledged that his view of me was true. I would have openly admitted that I was dependent on him, that I was not self-sufficient, *I entwined myself around him as though he were my savior*. Even though I wanted to, I could not allow myself to call. I was ashamed that I, by telling my experience, had gone to war with him. I was on the other side. Now we were enemies and there was nothing I could do about that. My truth contradicted him. Why did it have to be the truth? Why had it happened? It was all too late. I was in the after, lost and beyond rescue.

Therefore, I reproduced his words and thoughts. I was nothing. Desperately I sought to convince myself that I was worthy of violence. In vain I wished that I'd be able to go back to the time before. Not before our romance, no—such a thought was too abstract, too unreal. Did I exist if not ruined? Instead, I wished that I'd be able to return to the time before the shock. With all my cramping heart I wished that I'd be allowed to return to living in his view of me. Desperately I needed to return to living in his language.

Knowing that I had a bond to someone who despised me filled me with a devastating pain. I often suffered from chest pains. The cramps felt like a thousand stabs. Ferocious whips and burning lead. I couldn't do anything. His hate was directed towards my whole being, my essence. So I had to live on the battlefield lest I disappear. And how I wished I could have disappeared. My wish was in vain. You just can't, your subjectivity is unconditioned. Your instinct tells you to exist. But still, *I dared not trust the waves*,

and I was buffeted by my thoughts and the waves and the creature. I tried to convince myself that I was worthy of violence, but the thought resulted in a pounding headache. It contradicted what I knew was true. My body fought against my inner cerebral desperation that tried to reproduce his abuse. Inconsolable, I gave up. I couldn't return to life before, to the course of the stream. I couldn't let it drown me.

The #MeToo subject

Our time is completely ego-centric but in #MeToo it's precisely the *I* that's missing, the subject that problematizes its own role. #MeToo has nothing but two roles to play: the predator, who is turned into a representation of all men, and the victim, who has no responsibility or agency whatsoever.³⁵

EARLY JANUARY 2018, the journalist and then cultural editor of *Aftonbladet* Åsa Linderborg wrote a review of two anthologies that had been released during the fall 2017, also known as the #MeToo fall; two anthologies that assembled #MeToo testimonies. Linderborg warned of a risk that this feminist wave would be followed by a conservative backlash. The feminist narrative that was written under the hashtag #MeToo masked, Linderborg argued, a diminishing image of woman.

By now I was tired. A while back, during the summer and fall 2017, I had been given ten solution-oriented hours in therapy by the municipality. For it had been time to shape up. Yes, I had had a break in my life course. Enough. Now time had come to correct myself, so that I'd be ready to continue floating on. A good girl.

I had liked my therapist; she was so glamorous. She was tall, wore ravishing jewelry, she placed her fashion handbags by the window next to her desk. Her long nails were always done, brightly painted. She made me feel safe.

Immediately my therapist had placed my traumatic experience within a for her well-known pattern. Her familiarity with what had happened helped me in turn to deal with it more easily. The realization that my experience of chaos could be explained by a generalizing vocabulary had filled me with a much-needed calm. If I was living something common, could I then really be ruined? Thanks to the experience and expertise of my therapist, I understood that, although I couldn't see it myself, my life still had a narrative.

Could it be, did pure water really still flow along my river? When she later told me that my case was exceptional I was shaken with stunned surprise. I couldn't understand. What had I been through? Was it not placeable in that well-known pattern? In one moment, her words shoved me back out to the outside, the unknown, out to face that terrifying being that I didn't want to be.

A few sessions in, my therapist wanted to do a trauma exercise with me. She had printed images of staged scenes in an unpleasant relationship. By looking at these pictures, uncomfortable memories and connotations would awaken my nervous system. Thus, my therapist and I would be able to, in her white room at that municipal clinic, deal with the trauma together. She had a green plant in the window corner. My therapist and I had found each other in our joint goal to efficiently seek solutions. Ten hours—we got this. Time to fix me.

She sat on a plastic chair with a stack of paper in her lap, facing me as I sat on mine. She lifted a piece of paper and showed me her first image. Focusing, I looked at the posing strangers in the photo. Had she googled these pictures? Maybe, I thought as I studied them. In my mind, I pictured her carefully choosing stock images of people posing in different arranged scenarios. It was a moving image that appeared within me; she really wanted to help me, sitting there by her computer. My therapist held up her second image for me to see, and I tried to focus. She had prepared this just for me, so I did my best to feel that which the image told me to feel. I looked at the image, I looked at my therapist, I didn't know. That's okay, she said in a friendly tone. She moved on to the third image. I looked at it. I understood that this should awaken uncomfortable connotations in my nervous system. I looked at the image. It didn't look pleasant, I thought. Concentrating, I looked at it in silence. Was that an image of me? Did it represent my experience? Stress began to grow inside me, a frustration that I was about to fail my assignment. I tried to identify with the image. It would be best if it could make me cry, I thought. Focusing harder still, I looked at the staged relationship drama. Then, all of a sudden, my therapist called off the exercise. The method isn't working, she said. Her abrupt interruption took me by surprise. The stack of paper lay in her lap. Embarrassed I sat quietly on my plastic chair. I watched as she got up and put her printed pictures back on her desk. The charms of

her bracelets rattled against each other. Shimmering silver and bright pastel pink, a tiny heart. While she put her well-intentioned preparations away, I sat on my chair without saying a word, though I tried. I had failed. I hadn't been able to deliver the demanded feeling. A failure, good-for-nothing. She wanted me to feel, but I couldn't.



I had used up the municipal therapy hours a while back, with which the Man had blessed me, and now I lay on my bed as usual, scrolling on my phone in my backyard tower. We're on the cusp of 2018. In my silence on the outside, I followed the world that hadn't stopped circulating, that world that calmly kept its course. I scrolled and scrolled, dug deeper and deeper, without ever reaching a bottom. The quotation above, drawn from Linderborg's review of two #MeToo anthologies, resonated with me. After all these narratives of passivity faced with the unpleasant, which had dominated the public conversation for months, suddenly the female subject was mentioned. I stopped scrolling and stayed in the text. Out of nowhere, in the secluded cave of my loneliness, someone spoke to me.

The hashtag #MeToo had taken over my Facebook feed that previous fall. Back then, in early October, I still went to my glamorous therapist. Depressed, I had endured a hot summer. In fetal position on my friend's beach chair. I was in my office at the university when I first saw the hashtag. One after another they made their confessions. Friends, family, acquaintances, not to mention celebrities, all and everyone told the world of their experiences of sexism and assault. Something happened inside me. I kept scrolling. There, on social media, an endless papyrus was infinitely unfolding, unrolling enough violence and pain to cover the surface of the earth, a whole society shaped by viciousness and pain. Back in my secluded tower, I kept scrolling through the eternal roll. My open wound was mirrored against a faint blue nuance, a logo giving a thumbs up.

Instantly #MeToo overwhelmed me. The establishment media reported and wrote about the hashtag and the number of women that had been victims of harassment, abuse, assault. One after another, Facebook groups were made to gather women from their respective professional sectors; they grew by the minute. It all had a massive snowball effect. #MeToo grew bigger with

every woman's participation, which in turn spread along with the accelerating magnitude of the hashtag. The groups created witty hashtags, word plays. It sure had something.

I was torn. From the start I faced the moment with an instinctive aversion. It all was too framed for me. It didn't resonate. It was tidy, it was too... *right*. The hashtag and the testimonies piled up after one another. And the public responded with reactions. Underneath the posts, by the minute rose the numbers of sad and angry little heads, hearts, hands doing thumbs up. In a choir the thumbs all gave their acceptance; it was good to participate they all said, in one same voice.

Back on my end, I was just busy with my own stuff. Every day my post-traumatic normality continued, in which I failed to find my place. Since I didn't feel in touch with my body, I had transformed my wardrobe. In big, infantile garments, I tried to catch up with the world that incessantly followed its route around the sun. In my free time I lay on my bed, my eyes towards the silent patio. I scrolled on my phone, keeping myself from texting my friends. Devastating pleas for connection, grief for being disgusting, lousy and ruined. How long would they endure? Silent I lay on my bed. Spring became summer became fall.

To me, #MeToo was just so neatly wrapped. It didn't match the mess that was my life, that was me. I didn't identify with the story that was being written in real time. And yet, I knew it was about me. #MeToo hit like a feminist blow. Having been a feminist since I'd formed a political stance, I found what was happening relevant. Countless women testified that they worked in poor conditions due to sexism. I deemed it to be a powerful moment, an expression of collective agency. It was inspiring. And still within me a discrepancy grew between the feminist roar that was channeled through all media around the clock, and myself.

#MeToo was an industry. It was a story about my life and I wasn't a good citizen until I had contributed with myself. So I gave in. I wrote #MeToo. In the wink of an eye, the traumatic process that uttering my experience had been transformed into liquidity. My voice transformed into a dutiful comma in the media narrative that was being written in front of my eyes. Thumb after thumb approved me. All these kind hearts beneath my post filled me with a sense of embarrassment. I intellectualized the whole thing

and my actions as if I was being recognized, as if I was an active feminist: *I partook in a movement*. But inside me I was struck with a sense of unease, of the realization that I had contributed to the cynical exploitation of me and a thousand others.

#MeToo awoke my nervous system. I was filled with affect. In my daily life I did my best to live on. I kept writing my doctoral dissertation, I taught students about love in literature throughout history. Nice and well-behaved, I eloquently verbalized my life in the municipal therapy. I was quite good at speaking Psychology; I knew the lingo from academic circles. I was oriented towards finding solutions. Looking for constructive methods to correct myself was an expression of my need to give my dissolved subject its contours back. Half sleeping, half awake, I found myself frightened at night, running to the door, controlling that it really was closed. It was locked. Awake and shaken, in daylight I laughed my irrational fears away.

I never wanted to be drenched with all this. I tried to free myself from my cage. #MeToo stirred emotions in my body. I kept writing. For the socialist paper *Flamman* I wrote an essay about the right to not speak. Mythical Philomela had her tongue cut off so that she wouldn't be able to tell the world of the rape of which she had been victim. #MeToo sewed her tongue back on and said well there you go, so say something! We're listening now, aren't we?

All to get a thumbs up, a faceless approval. In the post-traumatic life, I desperately sought for the subjectivity that had been dissolved in a mist. I sought for whatever remained of me now that life, that river that Malabou describes, had stopped following its course. To be accepted by Mark Zuckerberg's thumb filled me with a sense of confirmation followed by a sense of self-contempt. Our confession culture didn't resonate with my voice. Zuckerberg's thumb dubbed me a dutiful feminist, while I served it with my bleeding wound.



When Hysmine in Makrembolites' twelfth-century medieval Greek novel tells the others of her experience at sea, her utterance is demanded by her culture. She finds herself among a group of people, including her male authority figures: the priest, her father, her fiancé. By referring to norms and

codes according to which women should be silent, Hysmine expresses her reluctance about speaking. Out of nowhere, now they demand her voice and feelings. They crave the tale of her sufferings. Her experience is suddenly given space in the public sphere. Instinctively, Hysmine doesn't want to contribute. After an eternity of being silenced, suddenly a confession is demanded of her. The public wants her story.

In Hysmine's confession we face a mix of emotions. A complex experience is woven through her words. A tale of the monster's ambivalence, Hysmine's conflicting ways to cope, her fear and dependence. How shall we interpret Hysmine's fear of help? How shall we interpret her comfort in her fright? Which words best describe the vulnerability while succumbing to overwhelming waves? Rather than clearing it out, with her voice, Hysmine complicates the story. Perhaps it's precisely in the difficulty of grasping her words, perhaps it's right in her desperate lack of answers, that identification can emerge.

When Linderborg wrote that winter that she was missing the recognition of woman's responsibility and agency I lay on my bed, helpless. As so often. I dutifully scrolled the feed. I lay there again, in the dark, a tired gaze towards the screen's blue light. And just like that, the screen read that I was a subject, that my agency and will were real. They were true. I was struck with the potential of identification. Subjectivity is never passivity. The inopportune social critique of Linderborg's review mirrored my own sense of being lost, my looted store at dawn, my hopeless search for my self.

A dutiful citizen

*Kill me, my pains, kill me! Then at least they'll say
She died, but without ever changing.*

– María de Zayas y Sotomayor, *Amorous and Exemplary Novels*

This body

I can't dress nicely. If something looks too good or fits too well or doesn't mismatch anywhere, if nothing disturbs then I must change something. It can't look nice, not spotless and definitely not tidy. Then I can't wear it. I was so neatly dressed for the conference at Historiska muséet [the Swedish History Museum] that I changed from pumps to boots at the last minute. The sun was burning hot and everyone was dressed for the summer. It felt so nice that the women appreciated my female perspective in my presentation. Inside my boots the heat was burning but had I not worn them I wouldn't have been able to look in the mirror. The beautiful is absolutely uninteresting nowadays; I can't identify with it. If I'm reminded of the dirt that's forever on me and only me among all the pure ones, then my chest weighs ten times heavier and my body gets crooked, my whole being slows down. And yet, everything goes on as always, nice summer sweetness. I strolled around in the stores under rain and was a grey, uneven stone.

IT WAS REALLY an undramatic affair. It began already at the café. We would meet and together work on our respective articles. The café's big windows faced towards Slussen, an area named after the floodgate in the center of Stockholm. The rebuilding of it was then yet to be. Kolingsborg, this round building in the middle of the car roads, it was still there. Among asphalt and polluted emissions, a concrete gazebo. Lake Mälaren glittered under a clear blue sky. Spring was in the air, you could feel it. I wore a black skirt that day, a black cashmere turtle-neck sweater, black patent leather boots. The memories of the bright sun, my happy steps along Skeppsbron, the fresh air—together it all now grips my heart. Together they form one memory, an innocent hopefulness, so open to love. Today Slussen is gone. The space is now

a mighty construction site, a massive hole right in its core, the center of our capital. The heart of Slussen, an abyss. They tore Kolingsborg down, it's just the emissions left there now. Gone is the café, they replaced it with a bank. The remains of our romance are erased from the city. Our time together lies not hidden in the walls. As if it never was, our story. Yet the memory grips my heart, squeezes my arteries, twists my veins. Erased, etched.

Ready to go back to my place we shut off our laptops. I asked him to wait, I just had to write some correct addresses on some envelopes; they had been wrongly sent to my mailbox. As I meticulously wrote every letter, his irritation simultaneously grew stronger. We got up from our chairs, out of our corner, and left the café. A tense subway ride. I saw how he tried not to be as annoyed as he was. He didn't want to feel this way. I went up the stairs towards the top of my backyard tower, my boyfriend shortly behind. This wouldn't be the first sexual abuse. My contours had already dissolved, unnoticed. As we climbed the stairs I knew what would happen in there. To myself I stated that he'd take out his irritation on *this* body.

That body was already dissolved into an abstraction. There was no contact between my intellect and that body. That body was empty. To me, it was a placeholder with nothing inside. You're so stupid, he'd told me. You don't understand you own none of this. Ice cold, blue eyes. They were terrifying and beautiful at once. I saw myself as an empty jar of glass. That body wasn't mine.

Indifferent, he threw me on the bed. The penetration hurt, *aj*, I said. He leaned over me, his arms surrounding my being. I lay diagonally across the bed. I'm not there, I objected, it's not going to work. It was quiet for a moment. He looked into my eyes. Without a word he went back to finishing what he had started. I didn't say anything either. I turned my head away, removed my gaze from his. I looked at my creamy white wall. It was bumpy. Slowly, he pulled my hair. With his grip around my hair he pulled my face back so that it met his. It hurt, I said *aj*. He said I should look at him, so I looked at him. I looked him straight in the eyes while he did whatever he wanted to me. Within me that gaze is forever etched. Crystal clear eyes, glittering blue. Just like Lake Mälaren those very rare, heartbreakingly beautiful spring days. Like the sun's rays are reflected against Mälaren, so glittered his

big, blue eyes as they beamed into my green-brown ones. A shining sun lays itself over dry grass, a dried-out earth.

When he was done he pulled out from me. I remained lying down, still, my face facing up. Then all of a sudden, he jumps up screaming. Blood! he cries, he's stressed, looking for injuries on his body. I remained where I lay, still. Without moving my gaze from the ceiling, I said it was mine. He stopped. Are you injured? he asked me. I didn't know what to respond. I had no words if not to blame him. I didn't know why I didn't blame him. I was stagnated in my passivity, indifferent.

I remained still, my eyes frozen towards the ceiling. And yet, as if I'd left my body, I watched myself lying on the bed. As if stood I in the doorway, looking into the bedroom from the outside. That's not good, I thought. Poor girl. She lied on the bed in her soft black sweater, her black skirt drawn up over her waist. From the doorway, I looked in at the crime scene. I grieved that corpse. It's okay, I responded. My blood stained my white flag. I had surrendered. It all happened without drama. I wasn't even there. And then he looked at me, he smiled and said You see? It did too work.



In the spring 2019, author Zara Kjellner in the newspaper *Expressen* claimed that women's inner cores had become a good like any other. "We praise individuality and devour the flesh," she wrote. "Rawness is woman's ticket to the public."³⁶ I type without end as I'm writing this. Side up, side down. I write my insides as if I tossed them on the butcher's counter. I'm a product of my time. I'm built by a new media landscape. I'm molded from trends of autofiction. I know she's right, "Woman should be undressed, preferably naked, and then speak. Preferably about her body, preferably about her psyche. It should be authentic and above all, self-experienced."³⁷

A woman's space in the public is conditioned. She may participate as long as she also sacrifices herself. The priest that receives the catholic confession is in our culture replaced by a faceless, medial court of law. That faint blue thumb chooses to point either up or down, like a Roman emperor, the thumb decides if we shall live or die.

#MeToo was strengthening in different ways. I remember moving anecdotes, women who had lived long lives—now, through #MeToo, they saw

their own experiences being mirrored in others.' Now a voice articulated that which these women had endured for decades in silence. #MeToo made a space for women to speak up. To utter your experience can induce a sense of strength that cannot be overestimated. Language creates communities among people. From solidarity and recognition people tie a bond between them, using language. Thus, language carries a potential to disrupt the sense of alienation. You're never alone; this we learned that fall.

Still, the articulation of the female experience is intertwined with external, economic interests. Women's insides turn into headlines, algorithmic analyses; the media houses are alive and well. Stained by a market that lives on storytelling, language assaults my voice.

When I went into my crisis, I wrote more than I ever had. I took notes, in pads and in my phone. I wrote desperate texts, chat messages, blogs, essays, articles, even poems. I wrote having neither direction nor goal. All I wanted was to be assured that I wasn't ruined. All I wanted was to be told that I wasn't hopeless. I wrote, but there was no confirmation to be found. From my erring no answers appeared. I wrote and I wrote, but without ever finding a way out of my helplessness.

Now, alone in my backyard tower, I blamed him. I blamed him for having dragged me down with him in his fall. For having tainted me with his own misfortune. In my loneliness I lamented that now and forever I was stained with his darkness. I couldn't correct the reality, but I couldn't grasp it either. Trapped in my crisis I couldn't accept that I was powerless against the fact that somebody had violated me. That no matter how much I wanted to, there was nothing I could do about that. Why must there have been blood? Why can't I just reformulate what he did? On the phone with my friend, helpless I now let my lament be heard. Why can't I rewrite history?

Adrienne Rich hesitated to use herself as an illustration to write about female writing. But then again, what else is there to do? Given, as she writes,

the influence that the myths and images of women have on all of us who are products of culture. I think it has been a peculiar confusion to the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language.³⁸

I do what they tell me; hoping to get but a glimpse of their short and picky attention span, I flash my naked body. No wonder Hysmine doesn't want to speak. Adam Goldwyn reads the end of *Hysmine and Hysminias* as the public's craving for trauma turned into storytelling, noting how the audience demands of the hero and heroine, traumatized victims of slavery, to, "against their will and at a great emotional cost, narrate their stories during the course of a meal."³⁹ In the love story, right there in the tradition of romantic novels, Goldwyn reads a case of witness literature—intertwined with one tradition grows another. Love and trauma.

Language has both trapped and liberated us, Rich stated.⁴⁰ There it is, my flesh. It has to be, I know it does—am I expressing their command or my wish? How do I tell the difference, if ever there was one?

Crawling into a ball on my bed, I wanted to disappear. With my hand I pulled the skin of my arm. I wanted to flee my skin. I wished for another fate. I couldn't trade my body for another. I couldn't escape. The darkness that forever lived beneath my skin was my new life. No matter how much I crawled into myself, so that I may shrink myself into elimination, never did I achieve true vanishing. Forcefully I pulled the skin of my arm until it turned red, but I was trapped inside it forever.

A portrait lost at sea

THE *MUJER VARONIL* is a type of woman found in the seventeenth-century Spanish comedy scene. The baroque, the Golden Age, as it were. She masks herself in male-coded clothing. She has been connected to the Amazon in ancient mythology. The Amazon is said to chop off her breast so that she can better draw back her bowstring while fighting men. She denies herself her female flesh in favor of her war. Many *mujeres varoniles* are further categorized as *mujeres esquivas*, which Melveena McKendrick has described as “disdainful, elusive, distant, shy, cold—no single one of these [words] suffices because *esquiva* contains something of them all.”⁴¹ They are “averse to the idea of love and marriage”, and, by consequence, “to men as well.”⁴²

In her study of the *mujer varonil*, and more specifically the *mujer esquivava*, McKendrick shows how seventeenth-century Spain was a space where many playwrights explored ideas about the sexes, identity, female agency, and the appropriation of manliness. The *mujer esquivava*, she writes, “more than any other female type, serves to illustrate the exact nature of the seventeenth-century attitude to women.”⁴³ Like the Amazon, by rebelling against her female identity, the *mujer esquivava* demonstrates the female conditions set by culture or nature, what have you. And she rejects them. The *mujer esquivava* can be interpreted as a response to a female situation that, in those cases where a woman hasn’t gotten a religious calling, means that in her search for meaning and happiness marriage is the only answer available. In her study, McKendrick shows how all these comedies end by affirming this idea of female happiness, and that the *mujer esquivava* is never voluntarily single once the curtain falls. Thus, the *mujer esquivava* seems to be in battle with nature, a classic case of hubris: in the end nature always wins.

Considering comedy as a genre, the *mujer esquivava* fits perfectly in these plays. Characteristic of comedy is that chaos is followed by a harmonization of order. The *mujer esquivava*’s rebellion against the social order can, hence,

be understood as a confirmation of this order. The female rebel turns out to be a patriarchal product. Just as the strong and fearless Amazon warrior queen Penthesilea is killed by Achilles, so is the fleeing, rejecting woman in the Spanish baroque comedy scene, through her marriage, also in the end a symbol of the dominant social order's unthreatened invincibility.

Two comedies by the seventeenth-century Andalusian author Ana Caro (d. 1652) have survived to our time. She also composed works in other genres and has been called the country's first female journalist.⁴⁴ The play *Courage, Violation, Woman* (*Valor, Agravio y Mujer*, probably published between 1680 and 1700,⁴⁵ but played before then) tells the story of Leonor, a woman who, as the play proceeds, performs different forms of disguise; she dresses in male clothing, calls herself Leonardo, hunts down and confronts Don Juan, the man who left her with broken promises and a broken heart. Humiliated, with the intention to kill him in a duel, she searches for he who has left her. Thus she shall gain her revenge. How to interpret Leonor's choice of male attire?

Abandoned in her hometown of Sevilla, Leonor decides to go after Don Juan, who has gone to Brussels with her brother Don Fernando. With the ambition of regaining her honor, Leonor disguises herself as a man, as *Leonardo*. Together with her servant Ribete, she travels to Flanders. But in Brussels, Don Juan has already fallen for another woman, Countess Estela. Estela, though, doesn't love Don Juan. In fact, she'll soon fall in love with Leonardo—Leonor in disguise. Even though Leonor has planned to get her revenge by killing Don Juan, she'll never achieve it in the end. Instead, they marry, which restores Leonor's lost honor. Estela marries Don Fernando, Leonor's brother.

Leonor can be defined as a *mujer varonil*, and more specifically a *mujer esquiva*. Her crossdressing has been interpreted differently. For example, Matthew Stroud argues that she is characterized according to how women who dress in male attire traditionally are characterized, by manifesting sides from both male and female gender roles, "beauty and bravery, tenderness and violence, discretion and audacity."⁴⁶ McKendrick's reasoning on how the *mujer esquiva* is at war with nature echoes Stroud's description of Leonor as "a monster of nature, an impossible creature made from contradictory matter, to those who strictly divide men's and women's social roles."⁴⁷

Stroud argues that Leonor is a non-binary character, that “she is the height of the human and the female,” and that she, thus, “is the manifestations of female and male virtues at once.”⁴⁸

The play has been interpreted as offering a perspective of resistance against the idea of binary genders. As a non-binary character, Leonor’s gender is represented as a performative matter. When her servant Ribete hears Leonor speak, he says that he also perceives her, by seeing her clothing, as if she has gone through a transformation. Leonor responds: “I am who I am!”⁴⁹ You fool yourself if you believe that I am a woman. My violated honor changed my being.”⁵⁰ In these lines, Stephanie Bates and A. Robert Lauer read a complete transformation of Leonor’s being. Now, they argue, she has *become* “Leonor/Leonardo”, “an entity of her own, distanced from the social construction of binary divided genders”.⁵¹ As Leonor dresses in male attire, acts like the men around her do, defends her honor according to male code, she is also interpreted as *really transforming*, as if she *becomes man*, given that this is how those who observe her see her. Based on Judith Butler’s ideas of gender performativity, Bates and Lauer write that in her play, Ana Caro creates a sort of dissolution of the dominant, binary gender system, or that she, in other words, creates *gender trouble*.⁵²

But I think that Leonor’s crossdressing represents something different than all that. I’d say that it articulates another view of gender. While Stroud and Bates and Lauer describe Leonor’s courage, audacity, violence, even agency, as all being male components that Leonor appropriates through male attire, I think that their respective analyses say more about our time’s view on gender, rather than an idea that is present in Ana Caro’s work.

Like the *mujer esquiva*, Leonor can be described as avoidant, rejecting, and cold. Although she regains her honor by marrying Don Juan, it is her thirst for revenge that motivates her actions, not marriage. Hence, we could interpret Leonor as reluctant to matrimony; it’s not the idea of marriage that drives her. But she’s not at war with nature either. She doesn’t seem to be a construct of contradicting matter. Rather, Ana Caro formulates an idea not too far from what we tend to call equality feminism. In Ana Caro’s plays, we meet characters who deal with the difficulty of being agents in a world that objectifies them. Both the traditional conformist woman, whose goal is marriage, and the resisting *mujer esquiva*, who finds herself forced to

succumb to the social order, seem to symbolize two sides of the same patriarchal paradigm. And stuck in this paradigm, from within it, Ana Caro seeks a way out by use of her pen.

In our time, Ana Caro is a quite forgotten author. In her own day, however, she was well-known and praised: they called her *la (decima) musa sevillana*, Seville's (tenth) muse.⁵³ Ana Caro was friends with another renowned author, the novelist María de Zayas y Sotomayor, whom she described as "the new Sappho," "a new marvel for men, a new astonishment for women," and tells her: "your pen writes, you sing."⁵⁴ Both Ana Caro and María de Zayas express pride in their own writing. Pilar Alcalde argues that both can be described as participating in a humanist project that aimed at uplifting female virtue. And female virtue indeed both authors expounded in their works. By referring to female authors from antiquity onwards, both Ana Caro and María de Zayas legitimized their own writing, Alcalde writes.⁵⁵ By appropriating the literary canon, both women respectively fashion a space for themselves to work as authors.

It's with this perspective that we should understand Leonor's use of male attire, if you ask me. As she disguises herself as a man, she creates the possibility for her to travel to Brussels on her own and find the man who has betrayed her. Through her disguise, she gives herself room to challenge Don Juan to a duel. By appropriating existing tools, Leonor fashions a space to act inside the order of patriarchy.

Thus, her female body can be seen as standing in the way of her struggle for lost honor. She must hide it. Leonor doesn't transform herself through her clothes. Her male-coded virtues are not inherent in her attributes. A man can move freely in the world. Language is his universe. It's not an attempt to deny herself her feminine being in favor of masculinity that explains Leonor's crossdressing. Rather, it's an attempt to make herself invisible to the male gaze. A tool to hand herself access to that blessed world. Ironically, it's by making herself disappear that Leonor seeks for a way out from the black hole.

*It has so happened, when I've tried to sleep or wake up in my bed,
that I find myself in the exact same place and position. I'm there
again: in the same place, in the same body. I can hear his voice,*

meet his gaze that's confronting mine. I hear the sound again; I feel it against my cheek. I squeak my eyes together; I shrink. I'm there again. I crawl into myself, diminishing myself. As then, I crook my head downwards and make myself smaller; I'm powerless. As then, I must turn my head upwards and face him. I'm alone in my home; I'm just trying to sleep like always or wake up like always. But I'm in the same room in the same body. It so happens that my brain won't allow me to understand that in spite of my efforts, and it so happens that it forces me to understand that. I let him into my home, my room, my bed. It so happens, when I'm at home, that I think maybe I should lock the top lock. I know it's irrational to think that; I know there's no need. In March, this spring, we met at Hötorget's flea market; I was there to buy records. He was running late so I strolled around and looked for a while on my own. It was sunny, a typically nice spring day, a lot of people. Suddenly he was there, in the middle of the square, we bumped into each other. I found him or he found me. We went back to my place together. Along my street through the entrance of my building and up the stairs. I let malice into my home. Today, I found myself back at the same flea market. The sky was greyer today; the air felt muggy and the clouds were thicker, lying close to one another, it was just as many people there. The desire to stroll around like before was exchanged for a sense of threat. I knew he wasn't there. But I could find him or he find me. I'm fine but I was reminded of my tear ducts. I left the square. Where is he in this moment? There's someone in Stockholm who surely cared for me dearly, but who also detested me. I'm back home now, resting my feet, lying on my bed. I know I don't need to lock the top lock. There's a person in Stockholm who detests me, whom I let in.

Leonor has male and female identities taking turns. By the end of the second day, Don Juan mistakes the femininely-dressed Leonor for Estela, his new love. Hence, also in this case, where she is in disguise but dressed in female attire, Leonor is invisible. Her identity is hidden. Protected by her clothing, she confronts Don Juan for his actions. And the next day, Don Juan speaks to the real Estela about his shameful past, believing that the two spoke about

it the day before. Thus, he admits his actions to Estela without knowing it. Alcalde argues that, in this way, Leonor as a rhetorician uses language as a tool to reach her aims.⁵⁶

Dressed in male attire, Leonor shows Don Juan a portrait of herself, of Leonor, the woman he recognizes. And as soon as he sees her face in the painting, Don Juan breaks: "Only I am to be blamed. I left her. I was ungrateful."⁵⁷ Leonor's honor is restored in Don Juan's act of articulating the words that define her as unjustly wronged, from the bottom of his own heart. In the painted portrait Don Juan acknowledges the truth that he has tried to escape. Leonor is saved by Don Juan's recognition of his unrighteous treatment of her. Justice was never found in any duel, no vengeance was sought in blood. With her brush and her pen, Leonor makes it possible to meet Don Juan as a human being, a subject whom he never had the right to violate. In her own creativity, Leonor controls the image of herself as a subject and thus challenges the male gaze. She hides herself from the gaze and confronts it from within herself. And, for the first time, Don Juan mirrors Leonor as his equal. Now, in the strokes of her brush, he faces her face, she whom he never had any right to hurt.



In the other of Ana Caro's surviving plays, *Count Partinuplés* (*El Conde Partinuplés*, 1653), the matters of hiding, invisibility and female artistic creativity reoccur. In this play, the Byzantine empress Rosaura seduces her beloved by the use of a portrait of herself. She and her cousin Aldora paint the portrait, place it in a coffin and send it out to sea to be found by the man she desires, Partinuplés.

As in *Courage, Violation, Woman*, here too a mystery concerning the heroine arises. She hides from Partinuplés and his men. She meets him, she declares her love, but she demands that he shall respect her wish to remain invisible, to stay in the darkness. He is forbidden to see her. And yet, she tells him that would he look for her, he would indeed find her. What does this all mean? Why hide from someone after having made the effort of bringing him over? Why hide from the one you love? Partinuplés has already seen her portrait. It's the reverse scenario of Leonor and Don Juan: Don Juan knows Leonor as flesh, until he sees her in her portrait. Partinuplés initially

knows Rosaura only as art, not yet as flesh. Body and artistry, together they form a wholeness to the female characters in Ana Caro's work. Woman is no longer symbol, but material being, and at the same time, woman is no longer excluded from rhetoric and art.

A recurring theme in Ana Caro's plays, in other words, is the hiding woman, who furthermore expresses herself through and as art. She controls the man's view of her: forbidding him from objectifying her embodied subjectivity with his gaze, allowing him to see her as an object of art, her representation of herself made through her own fashioning.



In the back corner of my closet my old garments lay. A black cashmere turtle-neck sweater, a black wool skirt, short and tight. There lay that shiny pink long-sleeve shirt, there lay that mini skirt with braces that I had worn over it. I had no eye for my own body. The body as a concept wasn't anything to which I had cognitive access. My neatly cut garments, soft pieces of fabric, they were now replaced by colorful, big acrylic jumpers, over which I wore corduroy dresses, two or three sizes too big. I was a bodiless stone. I had no access to the remains of my sexuality. I was sexless.

Solution oriented, I booked a date with a new acquaintance. Stressed by not yet being used to existing in lack of flesh, and not used to meeting men as the stone that I was, I sought for aid in the bottom of my wine glass. One after the other. I had fun, I tried to communicate, I was a sexual being. Everything was normal. In fast forward, I babbled on and on about medieval romances, for I knew that my identity as a PhD student of literature had a certain effect on men, well, initially at least. The second they placed it on the table and cleaned the old one away, red lipstick tainted the new wine glass. And yet I couldn't escape my feeling of invisibility. I communicated, I painted a portrait of a woman, but he didn't seem to see it. He listened to me, said this and that, he told me about his literary favorites as well as about his own writing. But I was desperate, I needed him to acknowledge my *body*, that dangling piece of flesh that in theory I just knew had to be there. I was a normal woman. Isn't this what a woman is? I forgot. Instead of finding the image of myself as a lustful woman like any other, open to love, in charge of her happiness, his mirror stared back at me blank. In our meeting I couldn't

find myself. To my despair, my new acquaintance hadn't shown up carrying my lost self under his arm, as I had hoped he would. Where was my portrait? I wanted to hold it up in front of him, an image of me that I'd recognize, not this new stranger, these million pieces on the ground, not this, anything but this. A happy, pleasant trope, a familiar femininity, that's what I wanted to be to the male gaze, not lost and broken, please not this.

I invited him up to my backyard tower. My old apartment with its tall windows, its creaking parquet floors, a quiet Atlantis right in the city center. Lost and hidden, but why? It was right there. My crater from which smoke still rose from the comet.

Once back home, I threw myself over him. Everything was normal. I was a desiring force; I was insanely drunk. I aimed to reconquer that blob of skin that was attached to my neck. We had moved to my bed, thrown the bed cover off, and now we found ourselves under the quilt. I tried to fill myself with life. I wished that he'd breath into me the air that kept his lungs going, without which his pulse would stop vibrating, the air that kept his heart beating. Like a vampire I sank my teeth into his neck, from him I tried to suck the fresh blood that I myself lacked. Green with envy, I saw life itself in him, while diverting his attention from the open wound that was me, that dry itchy stain that I by no means dared to scratch. Whatever happened, this living being was not to sense the coldness from my hardened blood.

Then, suddenly, he stopped us with his soft voice. Ellen, he said, you seem unhappy. In the same breath as his words reached my ears I released him. Instantly the room was covered in silence. That silent timelessness of the backyard trickled into the walls of my tower. I sat still on the bed, I avoided facing him, kept my eyes downwards. I had no words to say in return. Then we lay down under the quilt, close, still, and fell asleep.

A soul, a surface for projection. I desperately sought for an image of myself that I'd recognize when I looked at him. I hoped for him to see me as an embodied femininity. A body that would make me a woman. In his subjectivity I was incapable of mirroring myself. Our meeting was a subject in contact with a black hole. And yet, in me he saw what scared me most. Unhappiness. Meeting him, I hadn't found the reflection I had sought, the confirmation that everything was normal. That the world was in order. That expected harmonization, the happy ending, the curtain drop met with ap-

plause from a satisfied audience. Instead, he had reflected a truth. In a desperate attempt to endure without anchoring myself in my flesh I had used a human subject as a placeholder. Busy with my chaotic loss, I had indulged in objectification. Regardless, the man facing me was a subject in his own right. That's why, in his meeting with me, he also reflected the true subject that I was, but I wasn't yet capable of accepting the image that he mirrored.



While Ana Caro can be said to thematize the female body in a quite playful, explorative way, by placing the gaze in the woman's control, María de Zayas thematizes the female body more brutally. In her works, the body plays a significant role. Lisa Vollendorf writes about the collection of novellas titled *The Disenchantments of Love* (*Desengaños Amorosos*, 1647) that

women's bodies are described as incorruptible in death, as bleeding from beatings, and as seething with norms from decay. [...] Male characters in the *Desengaños* carry out every type of violence imaginable as they imprison, rape, poison, torture, strangle, stab, and behead the women closest to them. It seems likely that Zayas and her readers were familiar with such dramatic confrontations with the corporeal.⁵⁸

María de Zayas' way of narrating male violence against women can be understood as a response to what Vollendorf describes as "a variety of dominant (i.e., patriarchal) ideologies in the seventeenth century." In literary works, written under patriarchal hegemony, bodies are given meaningful functions, and, "in the cultural and social realms, men controlled the production and presentation of that meaning."⁵⁹ Where male power dominates female bodies as well as literary discourse, the corporeal violence can—seen from a female perspective—be understood as resistance against men's dominating objectification of women in culture. Vollendorf describes how María de Zayas' works tell "the story of women in her society", since she ties "a connection between women's voices and bodies".⁶⁰

To write the corporeal experience of feminine being. In order to understand Ana Caro's use of disguise and darkness one must, I believe, acknowledge the need to write this experience of embodied feminine being. Ana

Caro and María de Zayas were friends who admired each other's respective authorship. Both expressed pride in continuing a long tradition of women's writing. To interpret Leonor's use of cultural male code as a way to ascribe to herself courage, agency and a sense of honor means neglecting the sort of struggle for equality and freedom from violence that women such as María de Zayas and Ana Caro expressed through their writing in their own time, always without apologizing for being women.

In the prologue to her collection of love stories, *Amorous and Exemplary Novels* (*Novelas Amorasas y Ejemplares*, 1637), María de Zayas writes about how women ought to be given the possibility not just to write, but also to publish literature. Women have not published literature to the same extent as men, not because they are any less intelligent, she explains, but because of the oppression under which they live. From speaking of gendered attitudes as essences, María de Zayas brings the discussion to its materiality. Only then is it possible to acknowledge that beyond external, corporeal differences, women and men are each other's equal:

Furthermore, whether this matter that we men and women are made of is a bonding of clay and fire, or a dough of earth and spirit, whatever, it has no more nobility in men than in women, for our blood is the same; our senses, our powers, and the organs that perform their functions are all the same; our souls the same, for souls are neither male nor female. How, then, can men presume to be wise and presume that women are not?⁶¹

In María de Zayas' description of men and women's similarities, in which she calls for equality between the sexes, a political, feminist vision is crystallized, one that doesn't affirm any differences between male and female virtue. The gender theory that María de Zayas thus offers can give us more clarity as we interpret Leonor's method of crossdressing as she aspires to achieve her goals. Rather than understanding male attire as the result of a woman's need of masculinity in order to achieve courage and agency, Ana Caro's view of gender can be understood in relation to this wider literary context. It's just as María de Zayas said: in the flesh of both men and women the same blood runs, the same souls live. Indeed, Leonor needs to create strategies in order

to act freely inside her culture, but in the play there are no indications of her ever lamenting the actual body that she is all the same.

Leonor's crossdressing can also be interpreted more broadly in relation to the potential of female writing to challenge patriarchy, as represented in the narrative. When on one occasion Don Juan's servant Tomillo meets Ribete, Leonor's servant, he asks him about how things are back home in Spain. Ribete responds: "Same old, same old, the only new thing really is the domain of poetry; countless women now want to compose poetry, and they even dare to write comedies." Tomillo then says: "Good Lord! Wouldn't it be better to sew and knit? Women poets!" And Ribete responds:

Yes, but this isn't new, since there are Argentaria, Sappho, Areta, Blesilla, and more than a billion modern ones, who now shine their light over Italy, which these use as an excuse for their new vanity's audacity.⁶²

It seems that Ana Caro here humorously comments on her own position as a woman author in Spain in her own time. At the same time as she places herself in a long tradition of female writing, and thus normalizes her literary practice, she also ridicules the forces of repression that want her writing to stop.

When Don Juan sees Leonor's portrait, he says to himself: "It seems that in it I have seen the head of Medusa. It has turned me into stone, it has killed me."⁶³ Leonor's use of her self-portrait is as an act of power that can more broadly be interpreted as representing female creativity as a feminist act. In this way, Ana Caro's *mujer esquiva* becomes a poetic strategy. With the help of this type, a female subject is formulated within the male dominant canon. By controlling the gaze on her, Leonor negates male objectification. Just as Rosaura does in *Count Partinuplés*. The objectified makes herself invisible. From invisibility, a female subject steps forth.



Everything was normal. I should be normal. I'm a woman, I desperately tried to communicate to him, but you are what you are was the response that I got. What he saw terrified me. Unhappiness. Just see that female body, will you? Then maybe I will too, what do you want from me? What am I

doing wrong, how do I make right? Who am I and what must I do so that I'll be her to you? Everything is normal, I screamed myself hoarse in my sexlessness, but I had to give it up. In that old room I lay myself down. Between those white, bumpy walls, we fell asleep. A tranquil creaking sound when your toes met the parquet. Tall windows through which my Atlantis lay bare. A hidden world among them, right there, utterly lost.

And my closet became my dressing room backstage. There my masks lined up, ready to perform another comedy. All so that I wouldn't have to either see or show that body, that matter with which I was attached, unconditionally united. I disguised myself so that I could create a freeing invisibility. Me, a *mujer esquiva*. I couldn't see my body as being in a desiring movement. The thought of anyone else mistaking it for being in movement made me uncomfortable. I fused my clothes from the time before, from life prior to having fallen down into the black hole, I fused them away where they could collect dust, deep in my closet's darkest corner, never to be brought back on stage.

A dutiful Amazon

PENTHESILEIA NEVER STANDS a chance. As she enters the mythological storyworld, she is already defeated. Before we knew it had even begun it was already over. At war, Achilles' sword pierced through her flesh. Penthesileia we know, for she is forever tied to her legendary killer. That's how she exists in the world of text, in our minds—her wound gives her an inescapable space in history. A stab from his hand, one second for all eternity.

The Amazons were there in their thousands with crescent shields and their leader Penthesilea in the middle of her army, ablaze with passion for war. There, showing her naked breast supported by a band of gold, was the warrior maiden, daring to clash with men in battle.⁶⁴

Penthesileia is the queen of the Amazons. This quotation is drawn from the *Aeneid*. After some time at sea, Aeneas has just arrived in Carthage. He has fled the Trojan war, heading towards Italy to found Rome. Arriving in Carthage with his men, Aeneas now awaits the queen of the city, Dido. As he waits, he gazes upon a mural painting. The battle between the Greeks and Penthesileia plays out on the wall. Aeneas looks at the art when suddenly she appears. Dido, the monarch, sovereign, powerful enough to give laws, to which everyone is subject, by using only her tongue. Aeneas sees first the mural painting, the dead queen of the Amazons, and then the living queen of Carthage. Penthesileia and Dido.

It's said that the Amazons chopped off one of their breasts so that they could cast their javelins more easily. The weapon has replaced the nursing breast. In Homer's *Iliad* (*Ilias*) the Amazons are mentioned for the first time. They are described as *Amazones antianērai*.⁶⁵ *Antianērai* can be translated as 'men's equals'. This is what defines the Amazon, that she is different from other women. At the same time, the Amazon isn't a man. The non-binarity that distinguishes the Amazon marks not only her deviance from the norm,

but also sexual difference as such. The Amazon is man's equal, it is her lack of femininity that defines her. And still, she's excluded from the male sex. The Amazon is a warrior, an enemy of the Greeks. The Amazon is similar to a man, the equal of a man, but rather than this tying a bond with him, it legitimizes his warfare against her. With her chopped off breast the Amazon becomes a warrior equal to a man, hence, she is worth fighting, hence, she is worth killing. Penthesileia is killed by the most distinguished man of the Greek army, Achilles himself, the man with the burning rage. A resistance that would cost her her life. In the *Urtext*, Penthesileia's downfall is written down for eternity.



By this time, I eagerly read the tale of Dido and Aeneas. How Dido, in Virgil's epic, devotes herself and all that she owns to the man she loves. Fleeing Troy, Aeneas is on his way to Italy. His destiny is to found Rome. None other than Jupiter himself has assigned him this mission. It's beyond Aeneas' control and will; this is bigger than him.

As for Dido, she hasn't been assigned by any god to found Carthage. There's no higher power that has given her life its meaning. The reason she's there to begin with is that she fled her home. In her closest family, her safe space, she faced violence and hostility. Dido's brother Pygmalion slaughtered Sychaeus, her husband. Violence caused her to leave her life as she knew it. Ever since, Dido is left to her destiny, to nothing.

Dido collected herself, put herself back together, did she heal? She built a new home, a new life. Queen of Carthage. Then came the Trojan men, led by the son of Venus, the goddess of love. Cupid's brother trespasses Dido's shores. In her body, Venus had Cupid awake Dido's desire from its long coma. All of a sudden razzle her since long shut off emotions. Poisoned with love, Dido replaces all her thoughts with a dream of Aeneas. Her body has woken up. Dido feels her heart suddenly beating. Poisoned with love, Dido now desires a man with a god-given mission. In Aeneas' destiny nothing is written about reciprocating Dido's, or any other woman's, love. Her absence from the gods' plans with Aeneas' life shapes Dido's destiny. Lacking a fate of her own is her lot. Lacking meaning defines her existence. Like a shining

star Carthage faces the Mediterranean Sea, but Dido is doomed to the black hole.

I remember a particular morning in March. I'm awake; the sun lights up the room. You're still sleeping. I look at the corner of my wall, I look at the window. My wall-paper is white, kind of like old vanilla. I try to map the previous night, "oj...". It's quiet, you're lying close to me. The bear is sleeping. It's still peaceful and quiet when you wake up. We talk a little, soft voices. It's cozy, we laugh. I haven't washed off my make-up, on my eyelids lie the residue from my wet eyeliner. The cheap hairspray has made of my hair a bird's nest. Maybe I put my feet against the windowsill. There are my geraniums. The ivy climbs against the window, wants either to protect me from the world outside or escape from here. I remember thinking that I hope things stay like this. What happened was then, is history now—crazy, you must think so too. The morning sun reaches in here, touches my vanilla white wall-paper. It only takes a bare second. The atmosphere changes, your voice is new—familiar—you're him again. The future is determined, I know what awaits. The peace is over, the coziness turns into a memory. I must turn around, meet the new room. Vanilla white wall-paper in the morning, his familiar new voice: together they form a moment that has etched itself in my memory. In the blink of an eye, (1) I understand that the peace was but a loan, (2) gratitude for my moment in the normal, (3) knowledge that now I'll be hit. Thankful for my leave of absence. Now he'll hit me. Thankful, then into the mist, dissolve into steam. For months I've wondered how all that could fit into one quick moment. All that, but not even a whisper, not a question in sight, "are you okay?"

Dido runs towards the sea. She is furious. Aeneas leaves her as we speak. He leaves the city that she has built, the same city whose walls he helped her build. With her bare hands Dido had laid the foundations to powerful Carthage and is since then its queen. She left her violent brother after Sychaeus' murder. She left the world she knew. Her brother, her safety net. Safety became threat. Love hate. Dido the widow fled. By the coast of Lib-

ya she founded the city whose open arms would welcome Aeneas and his men. Now, furious with a shattered heart, Dido runs towards the sea. But her wrath has no effect on unconditional time. It's already too late. She has already lost.

He says, narrative is the aftermath of violent events. It is a means of reconciling yourself with the past. He says, the violence in the *Odyssey* is a story told afterwards, in a cave.

I want to live, I say. I don't want to tell my story. I want to live.

Z says, the old story has to end before a new one can begin.⁶⁶

In her novel about a divorce, *Aftermath* (2012), Rachel Cusk describes two senses of reality that are in coalition. In her ex-husband's story, the novel's narrator is a monster. The conflict over the truth has made her hate stories. So quickly can love become hate. In a moment, a metamorphosis. Your beloved one transforms into a monster.

My husband believed that I had treated him monstrously. This belief of his couldn't be shaken: his whole world depended on it. It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth.⁶⁷

It's there in the title already, the *Aeneid*, a heroic poem, an epic, the tale of Aeneas' mission, of what makes Aeneas a hero, his *raison d'être*, his self-realization. Aeneas never wants to hurt Dido. He has no choice. His life can't circle around a woman. His days cannot be spent building Carthage's walls. Aeneas is on his way to Rome, all according to Jupiter's ruthless orders. This task motivates the story—the *Aeneid* circles around the mission—the tale tells Aeneas' fate. Without Aeneas' egocentric self-realization the epic would never have been composed. The entire universe that is the *Aeneid* is also Aeneas.

“Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival,” wrote Adrienne Rich⁶⁸ Marilyn

Desmond examines how Dido has been handed down in the Western literary tradition. She argues that, although Aeneas has been in focus when the epic has been used in educational contexts, where boys and men learn of male virtue and heroic deeds, you find simultaneously a reception of Dido and Aeneas' love tale, and more specifically, a special interest for Dido. "For vernacular readers from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, reading Dido [...] constitutes a visible response to the *Aeneid* story."⁶⁹ At the same time as young boys learn of male identity while reading the *Aeneid* as part of their education, as they learn of Aeneas' piety, the story simultaneously lives among others who instead crave Dido's passion, wrath, despair, who read the life of Dido, her lack of destiny. Studying the reception of the *Aeneid*, you see two accounts at once: the epic story on the one hand, the truth on the other. "Readers of the *Aeneid* may focus on Dido and thereby call into question Aeneas, his destiny, the empire he founds", Desmond goes on. "By displacing the epic hero Aeneas, the tradition of reading Dido disrupts the patrilineal focus on the *Aeneid* as an imperial foundation narrative."⁷⁰ Let me, in light of that, cite Rich once more:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal to the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.⁷¹

In the twelfth-century Old French courtly romance version of the *Aeneid*, the anonymous *Roman d'Énéas*, Dido watches as her beloved Énéas leaves her:

The gods, as if they cared about all this! How great of an effort they make without end, and what an abundant pleasure they draw from ordering him what to do.⁷²

In the Middle Ages, Dido's pain drips with sarcasm. She no longer believes Énéas' noble explanation of divine will, no more does she believe the tale of his virtuous innocence. The world is disenchanting, the story lost its meaning.

Dido is left without faith. "As far as I can see, the gods couldn't care less if he'd stay or leave."⁷³ She believes the story no more, for she sees the world as it is.



Given my lack of connection with my own sex, my loss of touch with my body, I also suffered from incomprehension towards my own subjectivity. I knew that sexuality as a phenomenon existed, that people loved each other, made love with each other. I knew, just as I know that five plus five equals ten, or that Systembolaget is closed on Sundays,⁷⁴ I knew that I, myself, had found myself in sexual situations. I didn't actually *think* it, but the logic clearly stated that this was the case. I couldn't draw these situations from my memory bank. Simply put, my sexual history wasn't present in my consciousness. Any sexual present didn't come even close to existing, not even in the form of a theoretical conclusion.

Inside her city walls, Dido welcomes the Trojan horse. In the beginning, Aeneas helps build her walls strong. Dido dresses him in luxurious gifts. Then, unexpectedly, the gods' messenger Hermes descends from the sky. He has come on Jupiter's orders; he is there to interrupt Aeneas' co-construction of Dido's strong wall. Hermes accuses Aeneas of behaving wifely, of being *uxorius*, of having forgotten about himself and his divine mission. Not only is Dido *not* part of his destiny, she is even an obstacle to him fulfilling it. By Hermes' reminder of his true self and assignment, Aeneas realizes that he must leave Dido. In doing so, Aeneas takes with him all meaning, all future. Dido, who has been subjected to love by fashioning a mirror of herself in Aeneas, is suddenly abandoned. Alone she finds herself with a part of herself forever missing. The powerful city now appears to her like ruins. No future. Her construction loses its purpose.

Dido gives up. She throws herself to her death on Aeneas' sword. From his ship, Aeneas gazes backwards, in the distant horizon he sees the flames from her funeral pyre. May my death taint his noble destiny, Dido says as she surrenders to her emptiness. In sorrow, Aeneas gazes on Carthage, but the ship never changes its course. He sees her ruins, her death's fire, but they all keep shrinking, slowly, as he continues onwards. Aeneas has been assigned a mission by the gods. Dido was doomed from the start. To her, no assignment was ever given. Her self-fashioned equality, her way of dressing Aeneas

in her gifts, of making him her co-ruler: it was all but a self-deception, some silly *mauvaise foi*.

Eagerly I read Dido's destiny, again and again. I translated word after word, verse after verse. An edition that's now tricky to read, scribbled down in pencil doodle. I saw her in other stories. How the *Aeneid*, this *Urtext*, echoes in all those works that make the Western tradition. I listened to Beyoncé's video album *Lemonade* (2016) but heard Dido's lament. The work stands on its own, but the tale that the album narrates through combining songs and poetry, is about a scorned woman and a cheating husband.

Denial—shock—wrath—grief—resurrection—reconciliation. The reconciliation that Beyoncé sings of, that softening, you don't find that in Dido. I wandered around in my backyard tower. Over and over I listened to those words that knew pain, words strong enough to articulate reconciliation. I budded my geraniums, cleared them from all their blossoms, all their stalks. From my pots' dry earth appeared now nothing but small, short stems. *Found healing where it did not live.*⁷⁵ Beyoncé speaks in preterit, past tense. These geraniums, will they bloom again, stronger than ever? The heart that wakes up from its coma, the pulse that suddenly pounds. In that tone the story that is *Lemonade* reaches an end. I listened where I stood, silent and mauled, Dido on a beach in Libya. Exhausted, I heard Beyoncé's powerful voice sing in praise of reconciliation, while watching the ship shrink in the horizon. I wished that another tone, a softening, also could resonate with my life.

I couldn't leave my looted city. It had been emptied of all its meaning. I wanted to dream of a new clang, but I couldn't lift my feet from the sharp edges of the beach sand. *Pull me back together again the way you cut me in half.*⁷⁶ A powerless imperative, a tense of potentiality. Neither present nor future. I stood frozen with my gaze fixed towards my inner core. I wished to soften, to see the stalks grow back through my limbs, see the flowers blossoming out of the holes on my echoing body. I lost myself in Beyoncé's living tones, at the same time I watched as that which once was me reached the point where sea meets sky. The ship left my tumbled walls; I couldn't stop it.

The battle was over; I had already lost. I saw my inner core disappear in the distance, never to return.



Dido did everything to be mirrored in her beloved Aeneas. With her bare hands she built the equality that she hopelessly believed in. Along the streets of Carthage, she let Aeneas walk by her side. Then, protected from the storm, she committed her life's error: she deemed them to be married. *Mea culpa*—but why wouldn't she? Story is faced with truth. Dido painted a portrait of herself and sent it out in the world, hoping to be seen by her beloved. And still, she remained invisible, a mere shadow in Aeneas' universe. All that she had created lost its meaning in an instant. Invisibility drove her into an emptiness out of which there was no exit.

She sees him as he leaves her, he disappears towards the horizon. As he goes, her future is gone. The proud walls of Carthage now appear as lifeless ruins. Rather than being mirrored by her beloved as an equal subject, Dido finds herself invisible, faced with Jupiter's law. She was never safe, never under any gods' protection. Left to her lack of destiny, Dido appropriates Aeneas' own weapon. She raises his sword only to turn it against her own body.

A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the live woman.⁷⁷

Thus writes Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (*Le Rire de la Méduse et Autres Ironies*, 1975). But then what is a real, true woman? Perhaps just that, an alive one.

In the *Roman d'Énéas*, Dido is introduced into the narrative without Énéas having ever gazed upon any mural artwork. In this version, there is no painting of Penthesileia's unhappy fate. No association between the warrior queen and the monarch. No male gaze seeing first the artistic representation, then the real woman. Penthesileia's death no longer defines Dido's life.

Here, we meet *la dame Dido*, a courtly lady. We follow her passion, how at night, when the doors have closed, the lonely queen hugs her pillow, fantasizing that it is her beloved:

She hugs her quilt, but without finding any comfort or love. A thousand times she kisses her pillow of love for her knight.⁷⁸

The medieval de-mythologization of Dido, combined with her narrated shame of her emotions (she sets them free only in nighttime's solitude), together make for the possibility of a female audience who saw themselves in Dido's humanized characterization. In their reality, in their lived experience, what room did they have to articulate and pursue their desire?

Dido's tradition lives on, long after Virgil's own time. In it, Aeneas is placed in the margins. In the ancient myth of Penthesileia, the warrior queen is defeated. In the *Urtext*, she exists already as she is first mentioned as dead. Dido's feelings travel through the centuries. In parallel with the myth of the woman's defeat, in parallel with the story, a heart pounds in the shadows.

"It's exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful."⁷⁹ When is that time that Rich referred to? The dawn of the 1970s, I suppose. A living Dido, the portrait that she, following her desire, sent out in the world. An image, centuries of mirroring. An anonymous medieval poet. A faceless audience, countless individuals. A tale copied for centuries. A truth pounds in the margins. Re-vision—the act of entering a text from a new angle, the act of looking back. A movement that lacks chronology. An eternal reading, an ongoing conversation. A truth that travels through time; a truth that disrupts time's progression. Re-vise, re-read, sense your pain to end its solitude. Isn't it exhilarating?

Grieving desire

WHEN MARSHALL MCLUHAN claimed that the medium is the message, he pointed at how human activity and thinking depend on media. By using the myth of Echo and Narcissus, he demonstrates that Man is paralyzed through an extension of himself that emerges out of external media. He summarizes the myth in the following way:

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system.

Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves.⁸⁰

The mirror is a medium. It's an extension of Narcissus himself. The medium thus encloses Man within himself. Narcissus is struck by his own reflection and, hence, he cannot give Echo his love. Due to the medium, he devotes himself to his love for himself. Man is subjugated to the medium.

By referring to the myth of Echo and Narcissus, McLuhan argues that, through the medium, the human subject becomes a closed system. The myth illustrates Man's relation to the medium in our modern culture, formed by new technology and mass media. With the purpose of reaching his conclusion, he presents the events of the myth in disorder. The consequence of this modification is that one aspect of the myth goes missing. For the myth can also be interpreted as narrating a woman's access to language. Echo's act of speaking with Narcissus can be understood as the reason for him to reject her.

Echo attempts to unite with Narcissus by retelling fragments of his own speech. McLuhan argues that the reflection in the water, the mirror, is an extension of Narcissus himself. However, it is only long after Echo has approached him that Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection. The paralysis of which McLuhan writes does in fact not stand in the way of Echo and Narcissus.

Let me summarize the myth as it is narrated by Ovid. Because of jealousy, Juno causes the talkative nymph to only repeat the last words that someone else has just said. Echo sees Narcissus and is struck with desire. Lost in the woods, Narcissus cries out, calling for anyone to hear him and respond. Echo responds with his last words. He asks her to step forward, but as soon as she does as he says, he rejects her:

“Here let us meet,” he cries. Echo, never to answer other sound more gladly, cries: “Let us meet”; and to help her own words she comes forth from the woods that she may throw her arms around the neck she longs to clasp. But he flees at her approach and, fleeing, says: “Hands off! embrace me not! May I die before I give you power over me!” “I give you power over me!” she says, and nothing more.⁸¹

It’s not the mirror that causes Narcissus to reject Echo. The reflection shall indeed become his fall, but it’s the consequence of another rejected admirer’s prayer. After that Narcissus has played with his emotions, a boy cries out: “So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!”⁸² And Narcissus subsequently falls in love with his own reflection; paralyzed by the medium, he becomes a closed system.

Although McLuhan’s reading of the myth is in disorder, his point still stands. Narcissus’ tragedy lies in him being an enclosed system. When he hears Echo’s voice in the woods and asks her to come to him, it’s himself that he wishes to meet. His desire to see her is based on him hearing his own words uttered from someone else’s mouth. When Echo appears and wants to embrace him, Narcissus rejects her and flees. He’s an enclosed system: fascinated by hearing someone else’s voice, but only as long as the voice repeats

his own words. Already here, Narcissus is fascinated by the medium that extends himself.



Having my will endlessly being worked against had started to tear on me. Every expression of my will had been received as a problem. My will was a cause for worry and conflict, which was followed by a need for comfort. Inconsolable, he sat on my couch, tears streaming down his face. How he wished that my expressions wouldn't awake such revulsion. I embraced him; I understand; it's okay. And the expressions got fewer. And our disharmony increased. I pressed them down, but could still hear the words crawling up from the pit of my stomach. Like an exhalation they flowed out of my mouth. I exist, I said. My words in the world like air. I know, he replied. I was so tired of struggling. I wished that he'd desire my desire, but he couldn't stand it.

Echo's misfortune can be described as based in her being a subject. Her desire is the cause for Narcissus to reject her. At their meeting, Echo expresses herself and Narcissus wants nothing to do with her. Echo diminishes. In the end all that remains is her responding voice, an echo in the mountains. Since Narcissus desires Echo as long as she confirms him, initially her voice is appealing. She repeats his words. Echo's voice serves Narcissus' egocentrism and individualistic autonomy.

In my notes, I read about how I knew that he'd take out his irritation on me by punishing my body. Indifferent, I took it to be a normality—not for others, but for me. He'd take out the anger on *this body*, I wrote. *He desires it but it's nothing. A placeholder, a jar filled with air, air holes through the lid, no bug at the bottom.* It sounds metaphorical, corny, but to me it was literal. How can the literality in the indescribable experience be translated into words? The clichés meant something when they exited my mouth. Through the tips of my fingers they were given meaning against my screen. That body, a placeholder. He desired it for it was nothing.

In Echo's appearance Narcissus sees a stranger. He doesn't want to belong to anyone but himself. Narcissus can be interpreted as a representation of the subject of our times, shaped by individualistic ideals. He flees relational dependence. Since he already has gone through his paralysis, Narcis-

sus doesn't reciprocate Echo's love. However, Echo is no medium. She's not an object that can be used. Echo is a speaking subject.

McLuhan's obsession with the mirror risks omitting Echo's role in Narcissus' rejection. Narcissus is interested in Echo as long as she embodies an extension of himself, of his language. As soon as she appears in front of him with a body of her own, he leaves her. It's not the mirror that's at play here, but Echo's attempt to enter Narcissus' already enclosed system.

Even if Echo can only repeat Narcissus' last words, she still is no medium, she's not an object. Echo expresses her subjectivity when Narcissus "had cried: 'Is anyone here?' and 'Here!' cried Echo back."⁸³ Echo transforms Narcissus' words into her own. The deictic '(is) here' (*adest*) is given meaning by the contextual subject that utters it. 'Here' means something only when it is said in a given situation. Speaker and space determine the meaning of the word. Echo's utterance means something by her uttering it. She repeats Narcissus' word, but the word's meaning is created through Echo's mouth. In other words, Echo's repetitions are no repetitions at all.

Echo's words are hers in her own right. Narcissus' question if anyone is *here* becomes a way for Echo to say *I am* here. The same goes when Echo transforms his imperative "come!" to her own. By appropriating the language that she is given, Echo formulates herself to be she who *urges* (him to come). In Echo's mouth the subject is Echo. As she appears in front of Narcissus, rather than as his medium, Echo appears as a subject, and his interest in her vanishes.



I had lost the sense of my flesh. With my crisis, my subjectivity dissolved. On a cognitive level, I found myself incapable of connecting sexuality to my body. I couldn't think thoughts that touched on sexuality at all. My short skirts, tight dresses, my femininely cut sweaters, they were all hidden in the back of my closet. I bought colorful sweaters from sales or second-hand shops. I wore a pastel green, knitted acrylic jumper. In the front it had two big frills from top to bottom. I didn't think it looked good, thus it made me feel comfortable.

I'm not sure that words can translate the experience of not being in touch with your body. For me it wasn't accessible, the view of my body as being

precisely that: a body. I couldn't think of it as flesh, even less as desiring. One night I dreamt that I was out on a date. We're about to say goodnight. The man follows me to the entrance of my building. We find ourselves in that short moment when the level of intimacy is about to be defined through a hug, a kiss, or perhaps an invite. Now here we are, he and I, but in my dream the moment's potentiality never arises. Instead, I start crying.

Since I couldn't imagine anything that awoke sexual connotations—neither awake nor asleep—I burst in tears. Sexuality's potential was replaced with devastation. I experienced an absolute powerlessness. In the dream my tears had no end. There, nothing prevented my sorrow. Emotions that I wouldn't let myself feel during the day now poured out. In my dream, sex was replaced with grief. I wasn't flesh, I was emptiness.

Constructive discipline

IN HER STUDY *Between the Self and the World: Feminism and Ethics under Neo-Liberal Conditions* (*Mellan jaget och världen. Feminism & etik under nyliberala villkor*, 2019), the gender theorist Evelina Johansson Wilén investigates feminist self-identification and political activity in contemporary Sweden. The interviewees in her study are a group of young women in Stockholm who identify themselves as feminists. They describe a life of constantly directing a critical gaze on themselves. One of the women tells the interviewer that the critique against oneself that dominates feminism risks resulting in political passivity: “You’re very scared of making mistakes.” The fear is founded in how “your whole identity is built on acting correctly, on not wanting to hurt anyone, you want to make the world better.”⁸⁴ In our individualistic time, feminist self-criticism evolves into a state where, as Johansson Wilén writes, “the *I* rather than the act becomes the error.”⁸⁵

Sexuality is formulated as an area of improvement as well, as something idealistically shapeable. Heterosexuality is described as energy consuming, considered to be a thing that you can preferably discard. The interviewed woman says that she has chosen to discard “cis men,”⁸⁶ a choice based on her feminist analysis. She says that “it’s a choice based on a calculation.”⁸⁷ Sexuality becomes a matter of rationality. Rather than in the flesh, here sexuality lives in cerebral arguments. Thus, sexuality forms a factor in the individual’s discipline of the self.

Connected to the individual’s aspiration to discipline his or her sexuality, language is also deemed as something in need of correction. One of the women describes how changing her language forms part of her feminism. By working on her use of language, she’s finally gotten used to saying “*en*” instead of “*man*”.⁸⁸ Initially, the process is met with resistance, she says, but with time it gets easier.

In her study, contemporary feminist criticism of the self is understood as something that is largely shaped by neo-liberalism. Johansson Wilén defines neo-liberalism as

an ideology that is marked by the subject being made responsible through moralistic forces, at the same time as it, through its economic and political practice, leads to an ethical lack, where the subject's activity is limited and politically marginalized on a social, political and economic level.⁸⁹

The neo-liberal subject can be described as being marked by individual responsibility. At the same time, it lacks the means in its situation to create actual change.

Even though I felt aversion towards their neat packaging, I found them appealing, the word plays of the hashtags and that swirling force of collectivity. At once, #MeToo embraced my errant self, my writing, and attacked my personal quest. I wrote to write forth the contours that my traumatization had dissolved. I wrote to write forth a knowledge of who I was, my subjectivity. I sought to write to make myself graspable. I wrote because it was all that I could. My voice was all I had left.

So, in contemporary culture, my life fit perfectly. The media landscape called for my core. It pulled it out, into the spotlight. There was a demand for my soul. I carried a supply. There was a desire for me, finally. And yet, I held on to my core as if it were a precious gem. Forces were out to get me, wanting to reshape what was indescribable into a pleasant narrative. So I protected myself from the greedy hands that tried to tear from me my gem. I hated my gem, but it was everything. My traumatic experience was all that I carried within me. The rest was emptiness. My stone was my only possession, but it was lifeless. I was my experience and yet I was emptiness. I was a perfect fit for the media logic that stirred the conversation, a hand-in-glove to the culture that sought to swallow my flesh.

A woman's inside equals matter for media content. Her psyche is turned into currency with which she can purchase a position in society and reach recognition. We devour her flesh. Subjected to the regime of self-criticism she looks at herself and her bodily practice—her speech and sexuality—as tools with which she may improve the world. And yet, she lives in a time

where collective change is marginalized. Lacking political agency, the neo-liberal subject looks inwards, into itself. While social, political and economic change is estranged, the contemporary culture's female subject analyzes her situation by examining herself. It's *she* who needs to change and improve. By disciplining her own being, she takes responsibility for the world. In the anatomical theatre of the public, on the operating table she lays her psyche and body. While the public dissects her, she is given her place in the world.



But not all women who are interviewed in *Between the Self and the World* share the experience of having succeeded in correcting their sexuality. One of them argues that sexuality is rationally moldable, while admitting that she herself hasn't tried to reshape hers. In her view, sexuality is a choice: "If I'm attracted to women then it's my political choice to *become* attracted to them." In her words a discrepancy is expressed between the optimism of political activity, which here regards the individual's sexuality, and the personal incapability of a failing body: "sexuality is something you can change, it's a social construct and just as you've formed it through education as well as being influenced by it, so you can also transform it. If only it was that easy..." For her it's easier to fall for a man than a woman: "I've been in relationships with women but it never felt as natural. Unfortunately, it's been more of a struggle and a trial than had it been self-evident."⁹⁰

Similar to how changing your language is difficult, changing your sexuality appears as a struggle, as something unnatural. Rational decisions are put in conflict with the body. In its aspiration to live righteously and make the world better, the body becomes an obstacle for the modern feminist. The body is defined as a thing to defeat.

While the earth kept its track around the sun, the months kept piling up. I kept living in my emptiness. Day in, day out, I struggled to become normal, preferably to return to life before. I got too drunk, I hunted for sexual confirmation. If perhaps someone else would see me as a sexual being, then perhaps I'd also be able to.

In solution-oriented terms I intellectualized the setback that my sexuality had suffered. Eventually I made the decision to no longer live with men.

I discarded heterosexuality. So I went in for dating women. I decided that when the time was right, I'd make my own family, alone, that I'd be inseminated. I wasn't just solution-oriented, I was efficient too. I put a critical gaze on my situation. I analyzed the problem (me) and what I should do about it (me). Freedom and responsibility.

There was nothing constructive about halting and admitting the tormenting knowledge that rushed through me, which told me that men terrified me. I didn't want them to be close to me. I didn't dare to live in their presence. Too scared to let them into my home, into my core.

The other night I dreamt I was in the middle of a forest with someone I can't remember now—I wonder if the person was specific. There were wolves there so we were very scared. There was a young wolf there; we managed to kill it before it got us. But then our fear increased, for the wolf's mother would surely kill us to take vengeance for what we had done, and indeed: the wolf mother came. We tried to escape into a deserted house, but I never made it in, I didn't understand why. In panic I smashed windows and pulled the doorknob. Then the wolf mother caught me, my leg got mauled by the sharp teeth and now she'd kill me, I woke up in terror. I told my mom that I'd dreamt of a wolf that killed me and she said how strange so had she, and her friend too.

I dreamt one night I met a man. I liked him; we had known each other for years. We'd had a good time. In my dream the following scenario played out. We're at the threshold to my place, my backyard tower. I see it in sepia tone, as through a camera lens. I don't see myself, but I know I'm in there. The man closes the door. I see it all happen from where I'm standing, a few steps down the staircase. While knowing I'm in there, I watch as the door slowly closes in front of my eyes. From outside, I perceive my vulnerability, from a distance—from a doorway. I'm caught with a sense of powerlessness, a rushing fear runs through me, like a stream when it freezes and turns to ice. In there, anything could happen. In there, there's nothing to protect me. No one can save me.

I woke up in fear and sorrow. In a dangerous world I found myself surrendered to my destiny. A new world. I was vulnerable, but there wasn't any beauty in that. Nothing was sacred. In daytime, I economically analyzed my time, strength and energy. During the days' hours, under my consciousness' control, I made the rational choice not to face my fears, not to spend any precious capital on feeling them.

Anatomical theatre

THE DIARY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, autofiction, confessional literature, the podcast interview, the talk-show talk-out. True crime, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, blogs. Our inside is transformed into content on the market. We pay with ourselves and are deemed dutiful citizens. In *When We Speak of Ourselves: Swooping Down in the History of Subjectivity from Montaigne to Norén* (*När vi talar om oss själva. Nedslag i subjektivitetens historia från Montaigne till Norén*, 2018) the literary scholar Carin Franzén writes about how

over the last decades, market forces have come to be governed by a neo-liberal rationality that demands of each and every one to take individual responsibility for their self-realization, of which the other side is the anxiety of failure and depression.⁹¹

In the notes on my phone you find depictions of my disordered inside. There you find documented my desperate attempts to re-categorize a world that had fallen; there you read that *nice memories don't knock the bad ones out, they transform the bad ones and transform that which had been nice*. I read notes that try to grasp that the same tender body with which I'd been safe also had caused me harm, inside out.

In the middle of everyone's constant positioning, in any media *en masse*, I tried to understand that I, while shattered, existed somewhere deep inside. Had I only been allowed to exchange my body, tear apart my skin, then maybe I'd also be able to find my remains. Was my innermost core left at least? In the middle of public accusations and banishments of all that was exposed in its lousiness, I found myself called to point out the darkness of the world. I'd contribute by denouncing the vileness that was written in anonymous cyber forums, only to be made public later in the establishment media. At the same time his voice clung to my insides, pointing me to the bottom. I pulled

on the skin of my arm; I fumbled in the same darkness that the others, those above me, pointed at from their enlightened positions.

For years, the playwright and poet Lars Norén published his diaries, known for their brutal honesty. In them, Franzén finds that the subject's condition is that "the subject from the start is exposed and estranged to itself."⁹² She reasons that in Norén's introspective writing, there are "often experiences of precisely the empty or strange as a premise for a subject that finds its support only in relation to language and the world."⁹³ Compared with the discipline of the self that Johansson Wilén discerns in today's feminists' linguistic and sexual practices, in Norén's diaries, this "massive flow of writing" becomes the opposite of representations of a subject under neo-liberalism, molded by ideals of individualism. Instead, Franzén argues, the diaries form "in their flow and repetitions an exploration of subjectivity itself."⁹⁴

To me writing was ambivalent. Writing was an expression of my voice, my subjectivity. Yet writing was also something that economic forces demanded from me. Broken, I wanted to heal. I wanted to feel fine again. #Me-Too spoke of my life. But in feminist currents I found a life explanation that made it all seem so easy. The righteous feminist was marked by an idealistic purity, by good vibes and commercial collaborations. A dutiful vocabulary put words on the meaning of struggle. Activism meant to wash off the low and lousy within us and the world. Beauty against ugliness. Through rational thinking I'd improve myself and, thus, heal. It was my freedom but also my responsibility. I tried to re-construct myself in a corrected version. Despite my attempts to be dutiful I still turned out a loser. At the height of our confessional age, I experienced a reluctance to write.

My tentacles directed themselves outwards. They watched so that no one would be able to be violent against me again. I tried to avoid being violent against myself. Constantly set in a defensive position. I desperately wanted to stop repeating Narcissus' words. I tried to stop reproducing his objectification of me. I was no medium through which he realized himself. My voice was no repetition. I wrote and yet I was afraid of my writing. Afraid to turn my life into a story, into lucrative content on their market, I incessantly guarded it, so that no one would ever be able to use me again.

My writing was so important to me precisely because it wasn't a story. There was nothing constructive in what I wrote: I wasn't good. I had no inspiring life with which to entertain anybody. That's why I needed to write. My voice was the expression of my lack of narrative.

I was no longer there, not anymore. My body was an empty placeholder. I was nothing. I sensed a loss of my contours. No answers at my disposal. Instinctively, I reacted by taking notes. A text that imposes a state of loss, was that what they were, my whirling fragments? Ignorance is bliss. Alone and exposed, in an anatomical theatre, dark if not for the thin spotlight that shone against my naked torso. With my own hand I let the scalpel wander through my skin. From my vulva upwards, slowly, until it had completely cut open my chest.

I wrote my body, wrote me. "In a double movement, which exposes the intimacy of the *I* at the same time as it leads to its own expiration," to quote Franzén.⁹⁵ I experienced alienation. A stranger faced with the idealistic subject that was written forth around me. An unsettled, discomforted self, a crisis in relation with language.⁹⁶ With neither goal nor direction I wrote, stuck in an errant search for my innermost core.

Pussy bows

The guilt and the shame are unbearable. I crawl into myself, in my apartment, I become a little ball. I go to Bulgaria with a bunch of couples: my family and their plus-ones. In our rented flat I sleep in a small children's bed by the window. If you're a couple in these flats, you're naturally given a room, and if you're not they place you somewhere where there's space. And it makes sense that that's how it works: the lonely occupy less space. And it's healing to be here. I've eaten tasty fish and smoked shisha. I've drunk some piña colada and it can't really get breezier than that, right? The piña is so tasty. I swam all day long today. At times I swam alone. I swam against the waves, or along with them, or I stood—just holding steady—and watched as the waves came closer. I lay on my back and let them carry me wherever they felt like. With my ears under the sea surface everything got quiet. Apparently the lifeguard had blown his whistle at me, “he thought you were dead!” the others said when I returned to them on the beach. The waves were strong; they held all my weight. For a long time I let them devour me, purify me. I'm so far from Stockholm now. Then suddenly, I was reminded of the reality on the screen of my phone, and of the unbearable inability to deal with the guilt and the shame. I wanted to forget that reminder. I went back to swimming with my younger brother, but the guilt got in the way of the waves, which no longer seemed able to endure all my weight. Now, the lifeguard didn't need to whistle at me. It's evening and I'm back in the flat. I miss the silence from the sea's strong embrace, I need to be alone. My mom gave me a hug, then they left for the town. I lay down on my small bed by the window. I'm alone among couples but alone because I resisted. From having lamented this small bed I realize that it's my trophy, the result of my strength.

Finally, the guilt and the shame feel lighter, almost bearable. I got out; I ended it all on my own. I did it alone. It's dark; I turned off the only lamp in the room. From the outside you hear the sea's strong waves. I crawl into myself; I turn into a little ball. Then the others return: they're in a good mood and ready to play cards. We played tarot into the night. My ears go back underneath the surface of the water. Stockholm is so far from here.

Ebba Witt-Brattström writes that “we’re many who have not wanted to believe the worst of our dearest people. And men can be cunning, live two lives, in one life deny that which they proudly propagate in the other.”⁹⁷ Due to #MeToo, she has had to realize that she herself may have protected men who have been guilty of degrading women in their behavior:

Today I realize that my everyday life may have laid a fog over my knowledge of what can happen to girls and women. “Happen,” by the way, what a cynical rewrite, just like “exposed to” [*utsatta för*]. Not to mention the Swedish Academy’s gentlemanesque rewrite of sexual violence: “unrequited intimacy” [*oönskad intimitet*]. It’s as if language forbids us to speak out the truth: they’re perpetrators—(some) men and boys—who do this to us. In this way this kind of violence can be treated like some kind of natural phenomenon, as if the flash strikes women when they’re “exposed to sexual violence.”⁹⁸

The perpetrator is an actor; the victim is passive. The victim is, well, precisely that: a victim. This, they claim, nonetheless determines in any way the victim’s identity. In the situation, the recipient of the perpetrator’s crime is a victim of his actions. But if the victim’s identity isn’t determined by being transformed into a victim in the given situation, does the same logic apply to the perpetrator? Is he a perpetrator in a situation, and only then, or for all eternity? What does the crime say about the identity of the perpetrator? Is his life as determined as mine is, or isn’t, or however it is? The view of abuse and men’s violence against women is crystal-clear, and I agree: the guilt lies not in the hands of the violated woman. The shame is not for the victim to bear.

But how does this actually work, in reality? Is this explanatory model, which Witt-Brattström presents in her attempt to renegotiate language, applicable in the real world? The ambition is praiseworthy. It's difficult to protest against the intentions of #MeToo. Now, finally, women who have been exposed to (it's not easy to escape language's conditions...) misconduct will have their honor restored. Just like Leonor in her quest for revenge. Don Juan shall now be cancelled. Place the shame where it belongs. It's hard to argue, but why would you even want to?

It took me an endless amount of hours in therapy to pin down what this struggle for linguistic restitution meant for me and my life. So, okay, apparently I had *been violated*. To realize my role as a victim was difficult, since it meant having to understand how the actions that had, to me in my world, been expressions of agency, were expressions of passivity to them in theirs. When I had seen myself as an agent, someone who, in my own microcosm, had actively acted so that he'd get as little as possible, I had inside, in their world, actually been passive, a victim.

After having picked up the clothes from the laundry room in the basement, I went to our meeting spot. Carefree, I noticed that eventually I'd be a few minutes late. And all of a sudden I experienced the world closing in on me. What was left was our own world, and according to the rules of our world I now gave him an occasion to hurt me. My carefree strolling turned into a speedy haste. I deprived him of his moment. In an enclosed world, a cut world, sometimes adjustment can be resistance. Outside's own laws.

The agency that I believed myself to possess was now under revision and reformulated as that which the world explained to me that it was: vulnerability. Powerlessness. What remained of our mutuality, the reciprocal love? The union of two, equal subjects?

Countless hours I sat on my chair with a frustrated need to understand my own role in my love story. Protagonist, antagonist, helper, object? Their model was both clear and honorable, but from the outside I found it hard to apply to myself. The imperative that says I must see myself as an object appeared to me as new shoes that I needed to break in, shoes that scratched against my heels, causing the skin to open and cover everything in blood, exposing my rawness. The alienation towards a language that wasn't shaped after my body scratched me as I tried to move on. I didn't get it. I was there,

wasn't I? I let it happen, I said in exhaustion. What did that say about me? How did my view of myself as an active subject fit the feminist explanatory model over victim and perpetrator?



I had taken the initiative to go to Stortorget that Thursday, late April 2018. As always, I worked on my doctoral thesis at the Royal Library in Östermalm. I often spent my lunch and coffee breaks with my friend, who also was a PhD student of literature. We complained, as usual, about most things: this day and age, politics, academia and the world of letters, the culture sphere, the oh ever so dumb social media. From a smug, comfortable distance, we deemed ourselves as seeing through it all. We weren't part of that, we told each other as we sat with our coffees, surrounded by stressed professors, scholars, students, and authors.

The whole pussy-bow affair, like so much else during this time, awoke mixed emotions in me. Its packaging filled me with resilience. It was too pure and beautiful for me who, on the outside in the darkness of shame, kept to myself. The big daily newspapers screamed with anger; you could almost sense the saliva hitting you in the face as you read the indignant journalists' verbal attacks on the Swedish Academy.

During the same week as the pussy-bow demonstration outside Börshuset, the daily *Dagens Nyheter* published a public protest, signed by literary and linguistic scholars who now had united to declare that the Swedish Academy had lost all credibility. Over two hundred academics expressed concern for the scandals surrounding the Academy, and how these scandals would affect the esteem and future of the institution. Someone had put me in the Facebook group that mobilized the protest. In it, the scholars applauded themselves in their joint contempt against those last remaining pigs in the Academy. Someone got a signature from a celebrated professor at an esteemed American university on the east coast. It was a feast, but more than anything they wrote history.

In an opinion article published on the Public Service news site *Svt Nyheter*, the philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö suggested that we should close the Swedish Academy altogether. Rather than exchanging individuals here and there, he argued that the Academy incorporates an inherently outdated sys-

tem.⁹⁹ However, Tännsjö's structurally focused suggestion didn't get much attention in the Facebook group. In one of the comment fields, I asked them if they would decline any future award or stipend from the Academy. How much was their solidarity with the assaulted women worth? The responses were scarce. Later, back at the Royal Library, one of the protest's more active organizers told me that you have no choice but to accept such things. Saying no is a privilege. A naïve ideal, out of touch with reality. Like slaves under the king's protection, they receive the award with one hand open and clench the other into a fist. With their hands tied behind their backs, they are fused into rooms where the walls are covered with portraits of old noblemen. A funnel is placed in their mouths and sweet wine is poured down their throats, turning their protest into gargle. Imposed nectar and ambrosia. What will replace the last pig once we've chased it out of Börshuset?

In *The #MeToo Roar of History*, Witt-Brattström describes how women's experiences tend to fall into the black hole, an image she was reminded of when she noted how, during the 2018 parliamentary elections, all parties had avoided mentioning the everyday sexism that had been made manifest during #MeToo. All but one. The right-wing Christian Democrats seemed to address #MeToo, Witt-Brattström writes,

just because they had smashed a poster of a crying woman on the walls of the subway station. I went up and down the escalator, I read the text "Protect her, not the perpetrator" and I felt really weird.¹⁰⁰

Witt-Brattström's flabbergasted escalator ride illuminates that sadly #MeToo lacked general effects in concrete, political actions. It illustrates that sadly, as in the case of the Christian Democrats, #MeToo was placed in a right-wing populist discourse. The party during this time positioned itself as more acutely in line with the extreme-right movements that were further enhanced simultaneously with the far-right Swedish Democrats, a party with origins in the Nazi movement. Witt-Brattström asks, "How come expressions of a non-male reality are being put aside and ignored, turned into 'black holes' in a male dominated 'universe'?"¹⁰¹ The conflict based on the struggle for power over language is an important one, but in order to not let

it be lost, it ought to be intertwined with the power conflict that is based in material conditions. A dusty take and another black hole.



My friend at the library, with whom I had lunch that Thursday, liked my idea to go to Stortorget. I had suggested that we should do this as it was a so-called *happening*. History happened right here, right now, and I thought it'd be dull to miss it. I actually had no intention of demonstrating. Sure, I supported Sara Danius' initiative to sort out any misconduct regarding the Academy's potential funding of the cultural club Forum, as I supported her initiative to confront that tolerance over sexual assault that in that world appeared as natural as the air they inhaled. But I didn't go there to demonstrate, I went because I wanted to attend the event of the day. I was curious; I simply wanted to be there. We experienced a feminist momentum, and I had gotten the message; I needed to hop on the train.

Once there, we were drowned in a huge crowd. At the square were people of all ages. The big gathering induced me with energy. We ended up in the shade of Börshuset, under the windows of the room where the academy members have their weekly meetings. At the other end of the square, a stage had been constructed for the occasion. There, feminist figures gave speeches, which my friend and I in our dark corner failed to apprehend. Above the din, a voice was discernible, whose incomprehensible words chanted through the speakers. Among others, the public feminist Cissi Wallin, who had outed her alleged rapist on Instagram that previous fall, spoke to the crowd from the stage. And it was then that I was reminded of the performative nature of demonstrations. You can't attend it as a spectator. To situate yourself at a demonstration is to take part in it. Once there, I was made aware of my embodied participation in society. Only when it awoke did I see that my awareness of this fact had dozed off ages ago.

We found ourselves in a historical moment. It was swarming. And I hadn't wanted to miss out on history. Danius' waving pussy bow blinds the flashes of endless cameras. They fought for purity, for the restitution of literature and the fine arts. They fought to be detached from their society anew. The glorious world of letters. History was written right here, right now. Tempted, I sensed how I was being fused towards their threshold. And yet I

had failed to realize that my feet had crossed it already, that I was already on the other side. In *F: a Voyage (F—en färd, 2020)*, the poet and former Academy member Katarina Frostenson, spouse of the accused Arnault, writes that, “Many of the pussy bows in the ‘rebellion’ at Stortorget in April 2018 had no clue of why they were there or what they were doing,”¹⁰² and, looking at myself, I must say she was indeed right. But I think we may talk past each other. The square, the big crowd, all of it mirrored my very personal sense of loss. I found myself in my futureless after, and yet, I happened to stand right in the middle of their writing of history.

With my feet casually resting against the Persian carpet, I could sit deep in the leather chairs of the Royal Library, going on and on about the silly times we live in. There we had our witty conversations, our bashing over the media and *the careerists*, there we built our wall between us and them using our words.

While I stood in Börshuset’s shadows, trying to discern the words of popular feminist figures who tried to reach me through the speakers far away, I found myself forming part of a gathering that failed to induce in me a sense of belonging. This was about something beyond those women who had told about the assaults done to them. This was about something beyond Danius’ resignation from the Academy. There we were, all the many thousands of us, positioning ourselves within a conflict that wasn’t really about political change. In this conflict, you fought for a redivision of the power within the world outside the one in which we were. They wanted to exchange members of the Swedish Academy, but still keep the veneration inherent in its antique chairs. It hardly mattered that the same members who now positioned themselves against what had occurred around the Forum club had frequently before visited the club in question. It wasn’t a conflict that aimed at confronting the structure. The demonstration called for a shifting of chairs among *De Aderton*.¹⁰³ They wanted to keep gazing upwards, from the cobblestones on the ground towards the meeting room’s antique golden facades in the sky. This was about once again purifying that which represents purity. The problem wasn’t that the belief in purity had been proven to be false, but that what had once been pure had now been tainted. The Pussy-bow Demonstration was a finger in the air, the media’s *thing* of the moment. A longing after re-enchantment. Suddenly I was made

aware of myself in relation to the bourgeoisie: what could all this wit that I had thrown around me in that leather chair at the library have to say against my corporeal situation?

As I was waiting for the subway, Jens Lapidus' big face stared right into mine. He had a praiseworthy mission, but a struggle sponsored by Åhléns has nothing to do with my own. And yet I had let it become just that, my own. Or, had perhaps *it* rather made *me* into *its* own? Am I a victim? Passive or an agent? Language, voice, power. It's a mess.

"I sit myself down to write, but the sense of meaninglessness strikes me like the stale smell of a meeting room where people have sat for too long without clearing the air."¹⁰⁴ Horace Engdahl describes writing as something impossible to separate from your own time, or perhaps from your own context, to phrase it more academically. The romanticized image of the text as being free from the world, as if would it were a product of that which moves above flesh, above life, something for eternity rather than the coffee machines at work—that image is a lie. When they speak of re-enchantment in literary rooms I can feel how my face makes a face, it's a reflex. To re-enchant art, to return to find divine inspiration in the literary text, in my ears this all sounds like a desperate cry for idealism, a prayer to literature that it may precede worldly conditions. In reality, literature is low. It's tossed around among us down here on earth. You can't write without picturing an addressee at the other end. Literature speaks to us and is given meaning once we actively receive it. The author isn't placed above her world, of which she forms a part, of which she is dependent. Horizon of experience, thus was it put by Hans Robert Jauss.

Today, even when you're trying to free yourself from this pure-vs-vile dichotomy, it appears tricky if at all possible. Even if you want to display the human subject as grotesque, hence, she is human, hence, she is worthy of love, it appears as if you can't free yourself from the hegemony of purity's regime. In her literary diary, *The Year of Thirteen Months* (*Året med 13 månader. En dagbok*, 2020), Åsa Linderborg writes that "the pussy bows have made a goddess of Sara Danius, today she's compared to Jeanne d'Arc. Against her team Horace [Engdahl] places 'the snow girl' (*'snöflickan'*) Katarina Frostenson, equally pure."¹⁰⁵ Linderborg's text always stays in the world. It speaks to the very society in which it orients and by which it is made. The

narratorial *I*, a representation of Linderborg herself, doesn't hesitate to write forth her doubts, her will to understand, her egoism or her reluctant place in the bourgeoisie, in short, doesn't hesitate to depict herself as a subject in its wholeness, as a human being. She is sense and sensibility, intellect and flesh, a concrete being in a secular spatiality. As a contrast to the simplified purity of public discourse, the diary's Åsa incessantly finds herself in the tricky and complicated, the problematic. "What's a bit scary when I go through my diaries are all the inconsistencies that shine against me," she writes.¹⁰⁶

And yet this too is a literary representation with its own angles. Maybe we could understand them as a consequence of the fact that the book plunges right into the public debate. #MeToo is initially described, as is the narrator's knowledge of both the journalist colleague Fredrik Virtanen and the feminist profile Cissi Wallin, with naïve ignorance; Åsa the narrator doesn't know about #MeToo or Wallin at the moment when Virtanen is exposed as having been accused by her of rape on Instagram:

When I turned my cellphone on it beeped from an urgent text message from [the journalist] Martin Aagård. A woman had publicly accused Fredrik Virtanen of being a rapist on Instagram under something called #MeToo. She claims that he drugged her and then pressed his dick into her mouth. It's supposed to have happened in 2006, eleven years ago. How shall *Aftonbladet* handle this? Martin wonders. I have no idea, but she's already made the same accusations against Virtanen, though without mentioning his name. Back then he encouraged her to file a police report, which she did. The investigation was closed since it wasn't possible to prove that he had committed a crime. Can you really do that, is it not a very serious accusation, isn't it defamation? Cissi Wallin is the woman's name, maybe I should know who she is.¹⁰⁷

Rendering Aagård's claims in indirect speech diffuses the narratorial voice. From whom comes what information? Did the narrator Åsa know about the former accusation and police report? If we're to interpret the account grammatically, then yes, so it seems. But in view of the consequence of the event, such an interpretation gets complicated. As we move on in the narrative, we are made aware of the fact that Virtanen is but a person in Åsa's periphery;

someone whom she googles to get better knowledge about, someone whom she often sees around the editorial offices, someone who texts her when she has written something good in the paper. The diary's narrator is unreliable. No matter the deal with the narrator's previous knowledge, the conflict is established right here. A gaze filled with wonder stabilizes the narrator's positioning, which henceforth remains steadily throughout the narrative as, rather than being chosen based on worldly relations and interests, being chosen based on pure ideals free from corruption.

So, the diary's Åsa also writes forth her idealistic purity. *The Year of Thirteen Months* can be interpreted as a literary work that attempts to but doesn't fully succeed in challenging this our purity regime. That regime which forces us to point out the lousiness in the other, and in so doing, to lift ourselves up into the shining light. A literary diary can be at once honest, explorative *and* propaganda. I believe that a text, in order to be worthy of reading, must desire something. I don't mean authorial intention; I'm talking about textual subjectivity. "The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*," wrote Roland Barthes.¹⁰⁸ Maybe this is what awakens a hopeless longing for re-enchantment in people today: the insight that we can no longer trust even art, since, as it turns out, art is just as sneaky and ugly as are we.



What is agency? How do I understand my power, or lack thereof? Just like my acquaintance explained himself to be dependent on the Swedish Academy's awards and stipends, am I just as powerless faced with the pussy-bow activists and the Academy protesters' ongoing writing of history? Are we, as if by laws of nature, not just *victims*, but also slaves of the class with which we identify? Which is his responsibility? Which is mine? Do we have any excuses? What does it matter? What are our voices worth?

They directed themselves towards Börshuset's windows. Slogans and chants were shouted out loud. The wrath towards the Academy members echoed through the narrow cobblestone alleys of the oldest of boroughs, Gamla stan. Later that afternoon, they said on the news that the Academy hadn't had their meeting in that room in Börshuset. The pussy-bow protesters had gathered and accused an empty building, raised their voices, sung of the wrath that burned. They—we?—had accused an institution, attacked

ancient, yes, but nonetheless silent walls. In a shutdown room thousands of voices caused the windows to tremble. If a thousand voices chant but nobody's there to listen, do they make a sound? If the muse sings of the wrath that's burning, but nobody cares, what is her song worth?

Or did the emptiness show that the battle was already won? The revolution had succeeded. The defeated had left the fort. I found myself at Stortorget that Thursday because I didn't want to miss out on history. Academic, feminist, woman, I probably owned some old pussy-bow blouse that I never used. I lived in a (for my kind) historical golden age. "Pussy bows everywhere, there's one on every well-educated woman over thirty," Linderborg writes in her diary.¹⁰⁹ I guess she writes about me.

In the political struggle that seemed so pure and aesthetically shining, the dirty mud around me got all the more clear. At the women's shelter, I tried to formulate my endless search for a sense of being anchored. I wanted to understand. I sought for the remainder of the agency that I had believed I possessed. I tried to comprehend my new victim identity, my object position, my helplessness, that my understanding of reality, according to which I was a subject, didn't concur with the world's view.

The explanatory model is crystal-clear, praiseworthy, sympathetic, and yet it's difficult to trace it back to your own life. I failed to discern the sense of belonging that I was expected to recognize among the pussy bows. Instead I was struck with alienation. With my feet resting against the Persian carpet, comfortable in the deep leather chair in Östermalm, I had let a million complaints over my uneasiness in civilization run free. Now I found myself corporeally situated right in the historical moment. With my soles touching the vibrating cobblestones, I, the last pig, signed on to a historiography that never was mine, with my body as pen.

Dissertation embodied

*It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is
an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be
theorized,
enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.*

– Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

To love a bull

Have you ever woken up from dreaming a suppressed memory? Ever been surprised in your sleep that you've stopped dissociating? You're suddenly there again and you watch it happen in front of you, his eyes staring into yours, forcing you to stare back. I woke up inside my memory that morning and I had to tell, so I texted. My memory became too much to handle, here, take this shit from me, please. I've got something weird here in my head that I don't know how to deal with, help. His pupils drill through your eyes and you learn not to look away, you're like a dog that learns to act correctly. And when those eyes drill through yours they reach all the way into your brain and they start to refurbish in there. They drill their way in, you meet the gaze without blinking, he tells you what you're thinking, he sees that you're thinking those things, and you learn not to look away. He refurbishes in there and in the freshly styled room you don't fit anymore. You've got no room, so you must leave, and now you must say it. While you were sleeping you didn't dissociate but instead you remembered those eyes and that burning palm of his hand. You wake up, the room is the same but there was someone else in it? Or? The day passes, you're thinking, you wander around town like a zombie, stiff in your body, the arms straight along your sides, head down. Then you realize it: he was crazy! It's so simple! It's done, I get it, it's not about me! "It's fine!" you text, "I don't need to talk anymore!" But you meet anyway and you say it anyway. And the shock takes over. At the same time work, seminars, conferences. She took the shit but you're still in it? It wasn't simple? It wasn't about you? Have you ever sat among a bunch of strangers, or maybe not even strangers, suddenly freezing right where you sit on your chair by a paralyzing thought that takes a grip around all of your

body? The thought that all these people in here are still natural, obvious human beings, and they live on and have their stuff and they have no clue that you're among them but outside, for you gave it away, and you're not a human being anymore.

In the work of the twelfth-century Byzantine rhetorician Nikephoros Basilakes, you find a collection of rhetorical exercises, *progymnasmata*. Among these you find *ethopoeiae*, descriptions of characters, short utterances in the first person. Emotions and thoughts of mythological and Christian figures are articulated, formulated as these figures would have spoken. The rhetorical skill lies in the ability to write a character's voice in a believable way.

One of these figures is Pasiphaë. The myth of Pasiphaë is a story of hopeless love. Pasiphaë's unhappiness originates in her desiring a bull. Poseidon makes the Cretan queen desire the animal, which, in turn, cannot discern Pasiphaë's feelings, much less reciprocate them. In Basilakes' *ethopoeia* we hear Pasiphaë's lament over the injustice of loving someone who isn't of your own species. Her lament stems from her desiring someone who shall never see her in the way that she sees him:

I am not ashamed of this unnatural desire for another species. For Europa loved a bull, another woman in turn loved a horse. This was the same situation: the beloved of both women is of another species, even if the bull concealed the highest of the gods and the horse concealed Poseidon, patron deity of horses. But the gods discarded their disguises in bed, and then Zeus was recognized by his lover, and Poseidon likewise. And now one of the gods rehearses a drama of love in the form of a bull, and the bridal chamber will reveal the act and make the lover known. But why do I speak these words in vain? Why have I gone astray? A bull will refuse to be yoked with a woman, even if Love should compel him. He will always resist the yoke, turn away, and flee. I find fault in Love. For why did he beguile such a woman as me with a bull? I find fault with Aphrodite too. For why did she take pains to make a bull, an incompatible yoke-mate, my partner in the yoke? I am also furious with the Graces, because they have been so generous to a dumb animal.¹¹⁰

Pasiphaë's tale strengthens Witt-Brattström's reasoning on how women's experiences are fused to invisibility. In the eyes of the bull, she is nothing, she doesn't exist. Pasiphaë's hope is that, would she only put on a good enough mask, she could make the bull come near her, thus he may love her, thus she shall satisfy her desire. What a foolish, hopeless hope! Even if they're tied together, he'll be reluctant, and she knows it.

The myth of Pasiphaë is a myth about desire, but Basilakes gives it an added dimension in his version. Here, the focus is the experience of being tortured with an unrequited love. The yoke can be interpreted as the union or relationship between them. It's the yoke that the bull will want to flee. It's life with her that he won't want to share. Even if Eros would awaken a desire for Pasiphaë in the bull, the bull still wouldn't, she says, want to be under the same yoke as a woman. Whatever she may do to bring the bull nearer, he'll never meet her, he'll never see her like she sees him. In the bull's universe, Pasiphaë is doomed to invisibility, banished to the black hole.

According to the myth, Pasiphaë is helped by the inventor Daedalus. By constructing a cow from wood, on wheels, dressed in cow's skin, he helps her transform into the animal that the bull can possibly see and desire. So that she may seduce the object of her love, Pasiphaë hides in the cow, her disguise. She begs Daedalus: "be a clever inventor in bronze for a bull, and be an ally to Aphrodite, a supporter of Love, by sculpting a female cow."¹¹¹

Pasiphaë's hopelessness is founded in her being insufficient in herself. In all of her being, in her essence, she's incapable of winning the bull's love. Considering how prevalent transformation tales are in the Greco-Roman tradition, Pasiphaë's story stands out. She doesn't go through any transformation, but merely stages one. With the help of her fellow craftsman, Pasiphaë attempts to re-enchant the world. With her feet on the ground, she constructs the magic of the metamorphosis, all on her own.

Perhaps you could interpret Basilakes' *ethopoeia* as if entering in dialogue with the Lesbian poet Sappho, who in fragment 1, "Hymn to Aphrodite", have her lyric *I*, in her longing, pray to the goddess of love that she shall be her "comrade in arms," *symmachos*. In Basilakes' medieval text, Pasiphaë begs Daedalus that he shall be Aphrodite's comrade in arms—yes indeed, her *symmachos*. It's not Pasiphaë and Aphrodite who shall join each other in battle. Rather, Pasiphaë puts her trust in the inventor Daedalus for this

mission, in a human being on earth. By way of comparison, in Basilakes' text we see an emphasis on Pasiphaë's humanity. She doesn't speak to any gods in the sky, but to a fellow human. Mythology loses its magic. The transformation loses its enchantment. Compared with many other mythological tales, here no Zeus hides in Pasiphaë's bull. Her lament isn't directed upwards, but stays where she is. When Pasiphaë now, in Basilakes' version of the myth, opens her mouth we hear the voice of a desiring woman's experience of not being seen.



Is the myth of Pasiphaë a sad story? A tale of a woman's lot, of a woman's doom to invisibility? That's one possible reading. Basilakes' Pasiphaë laments exactly that, namely that she, a woman, loves someone who shall never love her. He's hopelessly vacuous towards her species. A bull cannot see Pasiphaë, the human. And he doesn't seem to have any desire to even try. Basilakes takes the difference of species between them and makes of it a question of sexual difference: it's precisely with woman that the bull won't want to share his yoke. This reading, which could be viewed as an example of difference feminism, presents the meeting between the two sexes as a depressing impossibility. Difference feminism, as in this case the human is woman, whereas man is an animal. According to this reading, heterosexuality appears doomed from the start. Man is unable to fully see woman. He shall never love her, since in her he shall never mirror himself.

Yet, as so often in the world of mythology, you can read the text in more than one way. During the twelfth century, Basilakes' time, courtly lyric was developing in Western Europe. In the Occitan and Provençal vernaculars (and then in French), the idea of *fin'amor* was crafted in poetry, a refined love. Lyric fashions *fin'amor* in itself. The ideal is to transform your desire into song. The emotion *is* the expression. According to the model, the desiring subject is male, desiring a lady whose status reaches above his own. Thus, she isn't attainable for him. Love, as represented in courtly lyric, isn't first and foremost a matter of the desire's final, corporeal goal. Rather, it's a matter of sublimating desire into art. The woman is thus needed by the speaking subject. Her role in the poem is to be loved by someone beneath her own worth. Her role is to be loved, not to love. According to the model, woman

is a silent configuration. She is a placeholder, something that the subject can fill with his emotion, whose emotion thus forms the heart of courtly poetry.

You can draw parallels between *fin'amor* and the Greek god Eros, the goddess Aphrodite, and the ways in which desire—eros—has been dealt with in ancient Greek literature. Sappho's fragment 31 can work as our example, as it has been described as a depiction of desire itself:

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.¹¹²

In *Eros the bittersweet* (1986), Anne Carson performs a reading of Sappho's poem, arguing that it illustrates how eros unavoidably demands of the desiring subject that he or she not obtain that which is desired. Eros, well, desire, is exactly the movement towards something that the desiring subject doesn't yet reach. Eros is lack, Carson writes. This is made manifest in Sappho's poem. Desire is represented as a love triangle: a loving subject, a beloved object, and an obstacle that stands in their way. The loving subject sees and desires her beloved, who, however, gazes towards someone else.

The poem articulates desire in its physical form: the lost voice, the disobedient tongue, the fire that rushes through the body. "It is a poem about the lover's mind in the act of constructing desire for itself," argues Carson.¹¹³ Just as in the case of *fin'amor*, in ancient Greek lyric you can speak of the poem's articulation of desire as though it were a construction in one's own imagination, created by the lyric *I*, the poetic voice, rather than speaking of it as representing a longing for an actual person in the world. This is the conclusion Denis de Rougemont (1939) drew in his reading of Tristan's love for Isolde in the courtly romance of tragic love, an *Urtext* of romance as we know it.

An *ethopoeia* places the perspective of its character in the mind of its audience or reader. By giving a voice to the character, the rhetorician's task is

to awaken in the recipient the emotions that are expressed by them. Hearing Pasiphaë through Basilakes' *ethopoeia*, we get how she feels. We get the pain of loving an animal in whose mind you could just as well be dead.

Considering the lyric tradition, however, her hopeless desire is given another angle. In relation to Sappho's or the troubadours' representations of desire as being an emotion sufficient in itself, Pasiphaë's love appears as though it were independent of the actual bull. Now, when Basilakes writes an *ethopoeia* with the title *What Pasiphaë would say after falling in love with a bull*, the focus is on her words and her voice—Pasiphaë's rhetorical construction of eros. Just as Carson argues in her reading of Sappho's fragment 31, here the point is to poeticize desire itself, as it is constructed in the mind of the subject. That the bull doesn't return or even respond to Pasiphaë's feelings doesn't really matter. In fact, this isn't even about him, whose role rather appears as a projection surface for Pasiphaë in her act of expressing her emotion. A more historicized reading, which places Basilakes' *ethopoeia* within its literary tradition—both the diachronic Greek one and the synchronic twelfth-century one—presents Pasiphaë as a desiring subject. Sappho, Pasiphaë, and the troubadours—they all love with equal devotion. All of them speak one and the same language.

The myth of Pasiphaë is a sad story about the black hole, about woman's destiny as being excluded from the male universe, about the impossibility for her to by him be mirrored as a subject.

But other than that, it's so much more. Reading her emotion opens up the possibility of identifying with Pasiphaë as a desiring subject. Perhaps the bull will never feel for Pasiphaë what she feels for him, but that's not the point. The articulation of the loving subject's emotion contradicts the pessimism inherent in difference feminism in that, just like in man, in woman there is a movement in motion. Pasiphaë formulates her feeling and to the medieval audience she appears as a desiring subject. With her voice, the pessimism of difference feminism is replaced with the possibilities of equality feminism. In men's and women's bodies run one and the same blood, as María de Zayas wrote. Just like within him, desire burns within her.

Carthage

WHEN THE MEMORY caught up with my traumatized body, I was struck with new understandings of reality. I didn't know how to make meaning. The new information needed to be catalogued in my head. Existing information had to be interrogated and potentially cleared out, so that there'd be space for the new knowledge. As long as I could tell myself that this had nothing to do with me, that I just happened to be there, I didn't need to confront my memories, my fears, my self. I wasn't a victim; I was an ex-girlfriend. I was a normal person, a violated object only in one pair of despising eyes. Only one pair. I wasn't worthless except according to one bigger and stronger body. Only one body. As long as it was *he* who was *crazy* I remained intact.

Along with me contemplating how *crazy he was* I felt my body growing stiffer. A thrill rushed down my neck. Stiff, I wandered along the sidewalk, straight legs, my arms hanging straight along my body. I experienced my body as if it hung on to my collarbones, as if my collarbones were my yoke. I didn't carry myself, yet my body hung on to me. I tried to catalogue our time in the "other"-file. This wasn't about me, phew, good. I wasn't an object. I was whole, I was normal, I was like everybody else. I reasoned that neither his actions, thoughts, nor anything else concerned *me*. I tried to flee the yoke to which Eros had tied me.

Only one pair of eyes, only one body. Maybe he's alone in the world. Nonetheless he's here on earth. Nonetheless that gaze is real, that body is directed against my being. In vain I tried to tear myself free. In vain I tried to crawl my way up from my deep, black hole. Maybe he's alone in the world.



I had given it to him. It, me, my inviolability, that which I had received at my birth. My unconditional worth as a human being. What remained? I found myself without any hope of a future, without the ability to picture a time

beyond this right here, this which I couldn't flee. I had to understand that I had been through something that potentially might have affected me negatively. I had to realize that maybe I had things inside that were in need of being processed. Still remaining careful, I hoped that it wasn't too extensive, but, I thought, maybe I could benefit from dealing with this a little bit now. There, there, it's probably alright. I tried to understand my friend's words from our conversation. That this was a big deal. That I'd need my friends now. That it would take time for me to deal with this. That I needed to heal. I brushed her words off. I lay quiet on my bed. Don't worry, it's probably fine.

Even though I found myself in a completely new reality, civilization kept going around me. I had deadlines, so I went to the Royal Library and opened my laptop. Soon I'd travel to a conference in Uppsala. I'd return to my alma mater, familiar faces, my supervisor, colleagues, friends and strangers, I'd present my research and I needed a paper. To think thoughts, to conduct intellectual reasonings resulted in screaming headaches. It felt like torture. In the café of the library, I wrote about the presence of exoticism in the chivalric romance on which I was writing my doctoral thesis. Every word formed a gigantic mountain that I had to move. Pushing them one after the other took all my strength. Having composed a draft, I gave up. I set the course back home. I trotted through the park Humlegården, strolled along Sturegatan and turned to the right. I let the soles of my shoes hit the entrance's echoing marble floors, got out on the patio, opened the door to the backyard tower and climbed up, further up, all the way up. Key in lock, shoes off. I went to my bedroom, fell down on my bed and burst into tears. My face was flaming red, I sulked, I couldn't stop crying to those silent walls of my tower. I had nothing left. Not one thought.

My traumatization's root was that this was indeed about me. Pain passes, fear can be rationalized, but he had reached all the way inside and plucked me out. Through pain, through fear. As I needed to deal with the aftershocks of what had happened I had to enter a burgled, completely empty, echoing store. I had nothing left. I had lost my sexuality; he took that with him. The seminars were about communication with animals, or about subjectivity and schizophrenia, no matter what—they all got pasted against my skinless surface. I sought for myself in the circulated material.

I looked at the horse on the PowerPoint presentation, the horse that the scholar, through her diverse communicative actions, tried to control. The research investigated which actions in the dynamics of communication could make this non-verbal being respond to the doctor of philosophy's initiatives. Whenever the horse did something that the researcher wanted it to do, the communication had succeeded. All without the researcher having to utter one single word. While the seminar was occupied with discussing methodology and results, I sat on my chair, quiet, stuck outside. All I could think of was that horse, of me and that horse, of our enclosed boxes right in the stable that was their world.

The guest lecturer who built her research on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas on embodied subjectivity caught my attention. The exact questions that she investigated in her research I asked myself. What does the subject affected by chaos look like? Like this, I wanted to blurt out, pointing at my own body. Our joint search for the same answer got to me. I had wanted to meet her in this, tell her, but when I was given the floor I heard my trembling voice asking if you could understand Merleau-Ponty's idea of intentionality as something in line with Julia Kristeva's idea of productivity. It wasn't what I had wanted to ask her, there was so much else that I had wanted to say, really, and yet my question was genuine. The more I had subjugated myself to my body, the more I had found phenomenological theory to be crucially urgent. Semiotics and phenomenology. Text and body. Since within me there no longer existed any core, I sought for something that could explain who I was.



2018, USA, the Golden Globes. The beautiful actors and actresses, all in black evening dress. On the photos from the red carpet, crispy velvet shimmered as it reflected the flashing lights of the cameras. My eyes were blinded by the flowing silk that had been wrapped around the celebrities' statuesque bodies. Every week I sat face to face with my collocutor at the women's shelter. She took my hand and led me back again, back to that darkness in which I didn't want to live. Every week I had to return to the filth, to myself. But now, on my smartphone, something played out that was unlike all that mess. And yet it poked at my unglamorous dirt. As if my misery was being adapt-

ed for the screen, filmed in gorgeous scenery, portrayed by beautiful people who had learned to speak from the stomach, people who said words that they seamlessly tied to one another and that led towards an ending climax. Always this damn climax. *Finally!*

In her speech at the gala, Oprah Winfrey praised all these *magnificent women* and *phenomenal men* who shall be *the leaders* thanks to whom no one will ever have to say *me too* ever again.¹¹⁴ On Instagram I saw how it all played out. In the mess of my dark bedroom I lay on my bed. Piles of clothes turned my floor, chairs and bed into an ocean. Stacked books made a skyline, with its buildings and towers, an entire city. My room, my very own little world. Other than that blue light directed at my weary face, my tired eyes, my world was pitch black. The mobile screen, my world's Pleiades. In an old iPad I find a dusty old translation of Sappho's fragment 168 B, which I had made at one point only to forget it.

The moon has sunk down
and the Pleiades. Time passes
over to midnight. It passes
me by,
Yet alone I fall asleep.

(*Månen är nedsänkt hit,
och Plejaderna. Tiden går
över i midnatt. Den far
mig förbi,
Men jag somnar ensam.*)

I wrote an essay for the anarchist magazine *Brand* where I expressed the experience of alienation when a struggle is appropriated by both *the glitterati* in Hollywood and lucrative players in Sweden. I tried to formulate the palpable discrepancy between reality's unbearable filth and their pleasant struggle. I tried to recognize politics as being independent of capital. Lost and hopeless, I couldn't find my way out from my looted store, empty and echoing. In my phone the world reminded me that we were living a climax. At the same time, I lived in my own world, a futureless emptiness. Time

passes me by. This dark room, a city and an ocean, across which no one can sail. A silent, blue light.

In what yesterday, in what patios of Carthage,
does this rain also fall?

The question is Jorge Luis Borges.¹¹⁵ As I was in the middle of pulling on my arm, trying to tear myself free from my skin, they told me I was living the moment of the revolution. Finally.

On the train back home from the university, I emailed the guest lecturer who had given a presentation of her research project about chaotic subjectivity. She wanted to know how to understand the psychotic subject, from the inside. As she had written an article on Echo's voice, I had luckily found a reason to email her, so before leaving the university to reach the train station I had asked if I could perhaps send her my paper. I sent her my analysis of Echo and Narcissus, in which I compared the myth to a medieval French version of it.

In the medieval version, Echo is replaced with Dané. Unlike how Echo is verbally limited, Dané never stops talking. To herself, "God, she says, give me the courage to tell him all that I have to tell him when he comes, in all honesty."¹¹⁶

Dané sees Narcisse as he strolls with his friends. Afraid to be seen, she hides behind a tree. When Narcisse is alone, she approaches him, "without saying a word she kisses his eyes and grabs hold of his neck."¹¹⁷ Stunned by the girl's audacity, Narcisse asks her who she is, to which Dané gives him a long reply, declaring her love: "I'm telling you, I want you more than anything."¹¹⁸ In Dané's long speech, she makes sure that the words and desire are her own, that she pursues her own will and speaks of her own accord: "I haven't confided in anyone with this message, it's just me who brings you this request."¹¹⁹ After her speech, Narcisse answers her: "Young girl, you are crazy to come with such propositions, and you're starting down a bad path by declaring yourself a lover."¹²⁰

She's no nymph, but a courtly girl. She's flesh and blood. Does Dané's presence in the text tell us something of an audience that would more easily identify with a chatty girl than a silent nymph? Hard to say. All we have is

a manuscript from the fourteenth century, a collection of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Of these, the majority are Christian adaptations of the myths. But there are also three older tales, dated to the twelfth century. The tale of Narcisse and Dané is one of these three. How should we interpret this de-mythologization of Echo? The nymph is unwritten. Instead, a young woman of the real world is written into the tradition, one who doesn't say the right things, one who's clumsy and just plain wrong. To whom did this text speak? Who knows. Maybe to an audience of individuals who thereafter have remained hidden in the margins of common historiography.

In the email I also attached my piece for *Brand*. In my most intellectualized phrasing, I tried to formulate something like maybe she'd here find that perspective she sought, an insight into a shattered, chaotic subject. I didn't see myself as a PhD student who in collegial spirit shares her material with a senior scholar, an adept in search of a mentor. An adept looks ahead. She investigates, she's curious, she carries an urge for knowledge. The adept is an explorer who aims to contribute to the world with results; she wants to change the future. But me, I had no desire that burned inside. I didn't have any ability to think. I wasn't in transcendence, but in immanence. Future? My yoke was tied on so tight, this my doom to invisibility. An unmirrored *I*: can it exist? The loss of capability to conceptualize a future drove me to looking inwards. I couldn't find my way out of my empty, echoing store.

This was about me. It was about my need to find my way out of the store from which he had taken me with him, about my desperate search for my intact form, about my devastated denial of having lost. It was all about me, about someone who no longer existed. I had something weird in my head that I didn't know how to deal with, *help, take this shit from me, please*. The material was me. I was an object for the learned doctors to study, a problem to which I found no solution.

Unmirroring

I've gotten used to facing a new face each time I look in the mirror, to every day wearing a new mask. It was weird, but the day after going into shock I looked in the mirror at work, and I didn't understand anything. Who was that? I don't know how long I stared, studied. I'm used to having new lines now whenever I look in the mirror, new facial contours or new shapes of my eyes. So I've learned not to look for long, to not have the time to see my face. I broke down as I stood in my hallway. I broke down in front of that person whom I saw in the glass. Best not to look. I'm in Don Achille's basement, I'm looking for my lost doll. So I shouldn't be surprised when I get confused by hearing nice music. I listen to music about a love that is effortless, simple and nice. About when nothing happens; you lay in bed in the morning and you feel someone's skin wrapped around your own. When I hear that organ and guitar I'm filled with memories. Freckled skin and dark thick hair. Then I remember no face, for it is buried in my neck. It's a faceless memory. I try to remember his face, but at best I can only see it in flashes. Then it's gone, it buries its way down into my hair and my neck and stays there. It's peaceful. His face is an entirely different memory. So I should be used to confusion, but I heard the song and I remembered, and I broke down standing in the hallway. It all got messed up in my head again. Boundaries dissolved: affection was violence, love was hate. First trauma, but then missing. Confusion is tricky and worst case you break down, but I should be used to it by now. In that memory he has no face. Mine is in endless dissolution. But I've recognized my face for a week now. I'm so afraid that I'll lose it again, the little doll that crawled her way back up from the dark, dirty basement.

What is female subjectivity? In a male dominated discourse, in the phallogocentric language, is there any space for a female voice? Can you even really speak of a female language, of female writing, *écriture féminine*? Maybe there's no such thing. Maybe it's but a utopia. At the seminar I tried to listen. But in my corner I couldn't drop the thought that none of the people present knew that I was a violable object. To them, everything just went on as if nothing had happened. In their reality the world hadn't tumbled. There, right in their world, I also sat. I was a nothing, a thing. They were inviolable human beings. Each and every one of them carried an inviolable worth. And I sat among them. What if they'd known?



Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title and his titles, his pouches of value, his cap, crown and everything connected with his head, woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself: because she's a giver.¹²¹

I buried myself in work. I struggled with the headache that took over as soon as I tried to think. I didn't know what to do about the fact that I was expected to think. Can an object think? I don't know if you've noticed, I then said to my supervisor when we sat in her office, but I've been a bit withdrawn lately. I'm going through something right now. When she asked me if I felt a need to take sick leave I instantly protested. I didn't want to give him that control over my life. I left the university.

I recuperated on my bed. I crawled into myself, looked out on the patio. I had no other choice but to carry on. Theories of female subjectivity that swirled around me now appeared as if made of flesh. They pasted themselves onto my fluid skin. The quotation above is drawn from *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Cixous hovered above me.

While falling deeper into depression I struggled to write my doctoral thesis. It was hard to write. I found myself without any direction. I was melted. Extinguished, while my head pounded, I wrote literary analyses. A giver in pain. In my thesis I studied desire in ancient and medieval novels and romances. While the sources were gradually filled with flesh as I read them,

my own writing lost its structure. I found myself scared that I'd be revealed before my supervisor, that she'd find out I was an object without the ability to think, that she'd see how demolished I was, that my text was a structureless mass of air, that it, I, was nothing. At our meetings, out of nowhere I was suddenly struck with fear that she'd hit me. But nothing ever happened. She mostly talked text. For some reason she kept looking at me as if I were a thinking human being. I was surprised that her expectations never dried out. Not yet was my mask uncovered. As if had I kept writing the same story, as if floated I still on, along that river. She didn't mirror my hopelessness, not this time either.

I sympathized with Cixous' engaging encouragement. The whole essay is but an expression of will. The declaration is sympathetic. Finally, women shall start writing! And yet I couldn't fully understand her. Were we going to start writing? But I did nothing else? In its endless desperation to regain its self my body wrote. In my head they were fooled, those people who deemed that the cerebral preceded the corporeal. It wasn't anything I had any interest in discussing with arguments or theoretical reasoning. I simply knew that that was the case. It was a corporeal knowledge. You can't tell your body to write. It is your hand.

Work carried on, somehow, the earth kept its loop. I went to a conference. I followed the presentations during the different sessions. On a bench by the cathedral I sat with the scholars I knew, eating my lunch in silence. I presented my comparative analysis, exoticism in a chivalric romance. I answered the questions, none of which I remember today. An utter blur. In the aula I sat good, upright, trying to listen while my consciousness was tortured by suppressed memories. I wrote them down in the back of my pad, from the bottom upwards.

In her utopic tone Cixous seems so damn happy in her feminine being. "Write your self. Your body must be heard."¹²² I agreed. The dissonance between me and Cixous was found in her exhortation. The imperative makes of female writing a matter of potentiality. In her description of female writing, Cixous gazes towards the future. But I, who had been thrown out of time, I, whose flood had lost its course, I had no future. My writing was a consequence of my lack thereof. Before its hope had been able to paste itself

on my raw surface, her prophecy had already run off me. I wrote my self, my body was in need of being heard. But there was nothing utopic about it.

A thousand women

THE OLD FRENCH twelfth-century romance *Cligès* by Chrétien de Troyes is the story about the son of a Greek emperor, the knight Cligès. The emperor dies, but instead of his son inheriting the throne it is taken by Alis, the late emperor's brother and Cligès' uncle. Alis and the German emperor decide that Alis shall wed the German emperor's daughter, the princess Fénice. But Cligès also loves Fénice, and Fénice loves Cligès.

The romance has been called an “anti-Tristan” tale, as it reproduces the love triangle that is found in the legend of Tristan and Isolde.¹²³ In that tale, it's the knight Tristan who loves Isolde, and she who also loves him. But Isolde is married to King Mark, to whom, in turn, Tristan must prove his feudal loyalty. The solution for the unhappy lovers is to indulge in an adulterous love affair. Isolde remains thus in her marriage, succumbs to the social pressure that is courtly culture. A queen, a lady, a wife, she lives the roles that her culture expects of her. Nevertheless, in secret, Isolde devotes herself to her desire. Adultery forms her great love.

Fénice doesn't love Alis and doesn't want to marry him. She doesn't want him to have the right to her body, that he should own it. Yet, how can she protest, really? What possibilities does she have? No one has asked her what she wants. Not a single question has been directed towards her, nothing to which she could have responded “no.” She dares not go against her father. Therefore, Fénice turns to literature. By mirroring herself and her life in Isolde, Fénice fashions not only a strategy to act, but, on a more profound level, she reaches new insights about herself and her place in the world.

A reason for *Cligès* to be called an “anti-Tristan” tale is that the Tristan legend, in Chrétien's romance, is presented as a warning. Cligès and Fénice's situation is mirrored in the courtly love triangle. Fénice refuses to accept Isolde's way of dealing with her unfortunate circumstances. The tragic fate that met Tristan and Isolde can be traced all the way back to Antiquity. Tristan and Isolde's love, the *Urtext*.

I could never agree to lead the life Isolde led. Love was greatly abased in her, for her heart was given entirely to one man, but her body was shared by two; so she spent all her life without refusing either. Her love was contrary to reason, but my love will always be constant, because nothing will ever cause my heart and body to be separated. Truly my body will never be prostituted, nor will it ever be shared. Let him who possesses my heart possess my body, for I abjure all others.¹²⁴

Through the female character, the romance presents a theoretical reasoning, a philosophy on the essence of subjectivity. Fénicé turns to literature. In relation to her corporeal situation, she understands her own subjectivity. For Fénicé, subjectivity isn't a matter of abstract thoughts. On the contrary, it's intertwined with the body. Desire cannot be detached from thought. As she guards her integrity, Fénicé reckons that her being—she as a desiring subject—finds no room in the same courtly culture that objectifies her, that forces her to a role as means of exchange between political alliances. A medium. Fénicé refuses to compromise her right to exist in the world as the subject that she is, she refuses to have her desiring flesh disregarded. *Cligès* is an “anti-Tristan” tale; in the narrative, Fénicé reads the *Urtext*. She sees herself as mirrored in the tradition's fair, blonde Isolde. She sees herself in Isolde, she repudiates the story. With her gaze turned away from the *Urtext*, Fénicé seeks for the truth.



I held myself onto the chair, I wrote in a note on my phone as I had been confronted with a suppressed memory: for I was afraid I'd break down in the literal sense. I felt how my body could get crushed if I gave in, so I didn't dare. If I broke down in tears I might also break in pieces. The fear is real and physical. The arms, the back, the neck, the legs, all the body keeps stiff, still. My old Hua-wei is a long-lost patient's file, hidden and forgotten.



Fénicé comes up with a plan. She shall stage her own death. Only by doing so shall she be able to flee the object position that she was born into. Only by doing so shall she be able to avoid living with a man whom she hasn't chosen.

At the same time, she avoids the social suicide that would result from leaving Alis. Had she simply left him, she'd have no future. In life there are no possibilities for Fénice to guard her integrity. At the court, Fénice is not given any possibility to reach herself outwards, for whatever her heart may yearn. In life she's deprived of transcendence. Only death remains.

Fénice drinks an elixir that puts her body in an ill state. Thus, she pretends that she dies. Later, once she is *dead*, she shall unite with Cligès in a secluded hideaway. It's all perfectly planned. It's just that when Fénice lies on her deathbed three doctors pass by the court. They assure the devastated German emperor that they can cure his daughter from her illness.

The doctors are quick to suspect that Fénice indeed lies about her condition. Initially, they try to convince her to confess that she's alive. Using sweet words and promises, telling her that she can trust them, that they're on her side, that they'll protect her, the doctors try to get her to wake up from her lifeless state. But Fénice doesn't move an inch. As the doctors realize that their words have no impact on the princess, they change their method. Kindness switches into violence. The doctors carelessly tear apart her clothing and start beating her bare body. They whip it. They burn it with glowing lead. Fénice almost dies, and still, never does she give in.



Early on in my crisis I texted my friend. Calm, she told me to call a psychologist whose number she had. She specialized in relationships. This wasn't sustainable, how I was doing. But, I said, I had to work. They had let me travel; I stayed in a hotel. I never called my friend's psychologist contact.

Later that night, as I lay in the huge hotel bed, I called the national hotline for women experiencing violence, *Kvinnofridslinjen*, aware of my anonymity and freedom from any obligation. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being unethical, that I took advantage of resources meant for other women. I remember the woman at the other end as my first contact with

a sense of healing. She was warm, in a good mood. We talked long into the night, she made me laugh. I don't know her name.



In an interview with the German newspaper *Die Welt* from 2016, Rachel Cusk says that she began writing the novel *Outline* (2014) at a point where all hope was lost. She no longer found any resonance in stories:

What happens to God when you no longer believe in him? What remains of life when you no longer believe in it? What happens to a writer when she has lost faith in storytelling?¹²⁵

It was here, at the experience of loss, that Cusk began to write. At the loss of safety, hope and faith. A time when she found herself “beyond all stories.”¹²⁶

Cusk describes freedom as a terrifying thing. It's only once you lose yourself that something new opens up. If your life is a river that floods towards death, along which the subject realizes itself, and if the trauma results in the subject losing its grip of the river's course, as Malabou describes, then Cusk tells you that the subject nevertheless keeps orienting, it's just somewhere else. It's just outside. Outside's improvised vocabulary. “Nobody wants to lose faith in things; so when you get to that point there is something deeply terrifying,” Cusk admits.¹²⁷

Aftermath, she continues, “was about being locked up and looking at freedom, from out of a window. How to live in safety, but not being free. At some point you leave the prison and find yourself in a new place, utterly undefined.”¹²⁸ I'd break down sitting on that chair at the women's shelter. She'd hand me a tissue.



Fénice's staged deathbed now has become her actual deathbed. A tortured body. A body that can't surrender. A forbidden subjectivity. Then, suddenly, a thousand women storm the room. United, they interrupt the doctors' torture. The women don't care about waiting for any approval to act. As a collective they disregard the authority of any feudal sovereign. The women tear the men away from the dying princess. They throw them out of the

window. The doctors fall helpless to the ground, breaking their bones, backs and necks.

Fénice's condition has worsened. From having been pretending that she was dying, she is now really dying. She is carried to her secret hideaway, the place where she had planned to go and begin her new life after death, her secluded place of freedom. Now Cligès rushes to Fénice's lifeless body. Devastated, the knight throws himself over his persecuted bride. Fénice's struggle for the right to her own body resulted in torture. She refused to recognize herself as ceded to others' view of her, to their law. For her subjectivity to have a place in the world, Fénice had to put her self at stake.

And then the elixir loses its effect. Fénice's body awakens. She can finally embrace him who she desires. Free, Fénice can reach outwards, towards that which she yearns. That body, which was the victim of violence and violation, that body was capable of rising up from its downfall. Also the body that had been broken could love.

Blushing in the dark

SEASONS HAD PASSED. It was darker outside these days. From my bed, through my tall windows, I'd watched the fall pour down outside my backyard tower. My geraniums' stems, naked roots in their dark soil. Did any flower remain under there? The ivy kept climbing upwards along my creamy white window frames. Seeking its way out?

I cried on the phone. I cried because I was tainted with filth, because I was ruined. I cried because my life was over, because I was worth nothing. Then suddenly my friend told me off. She said I could no longer say these destructive words. She could no longer stand hearing them. What's more, in her my words triggered memories she carried of assault herself. (Bag ladies, aren't we all?) Her changed tone put me in a state of ashamed helplessness. I fell silent. I couldn't talk with her about this anymore, she said, if I didn't also seek help at a women's shelter or from someone else who would have the skill to deal with my trauma. I had become too much to handle. Incapable of speaking, I said nothing. I experienced myself as being lost, alone deep down in that basement of Elena Ferrante's frightening Don Achille. Her incomprehension hurt me. I didn't know how to say anything if not what I had just said. For what I had said was the truth, and beyond the truth I had nothing else to give. My life was ruined. I was without hope. I was wrecked, I was defeated. We hung up. From my bed I looked out at the quiet patio. The leaves flew around there, in the air outside, they were caught by the strong wind and swept away. All those words, unread. Her visitors give up their attempt to read them, they leave. The sibyl is alone again in her echoing cave. My little home, my secluded tower, covered in silence.

The following week I closed the door to my office at the university. Following my friend's advice I dutifully called a women's shelter. They let me speak to the woman my friend had told me about. The woman asked me to explain my situation. Dutifully I went through it. Time passed. Heavy, my back crooked, my forehead leaning against the edge of the table. She had

listened to me. The words were out in the world. The leaves had been sorted and placed in a row. Taken back from the stormy blows. She said I should come by for an assessment interview. Okay, I said. I'd missed lunch with my colleagues.



War isn't bad in itself, Cusk claims, "just like anger, war has no clear moral identity. It's neither good nor evil."¹²⁹ She explains war in functional terms, as being a mere method towards reaching a settlement when you've hit the end of the road. Just a method, a tool when no other possibilities remain. War is, she says, "the violent response to a deep crisis, which comes from the point where the possibility to reach a version of the truth that all parties accept has ceased to exist. There's no agreement over the truth."¹³⁰



The women's shelter is situated on a street where I'd been a million times, without ever having a clue of its existence. I had gone shopping there. I had strolled with friends there. I had partied there. In short, I had grown up there. That day I found myself on that same street, but it was something else now. In the after, the street awoke other connotations. Months had passed since I'd first articulated my experience only to get lost in my trauma. I found myself on new ground. I was outside but had been given the code to enter the door that might be able to pull me back into their world. By now, snow had begun to fall. Softly it landed on the street and transformed into slush. I found the right street number. I pressed the code. Along the narrow, long, orange corridor, I walked towards the door at the end. I rang the doorbell and was let inside. I was advised to put on the typical blue, plastic shoe covers, to keep the floors clean from the snow outside. I hung my coat on one of the hooks. The woman who greeted me was rather young; she could have been my age. She had a friendly tone when she welcomed me. Instantly I felt self-conscious. I really shouldn't be there, I thought. In completely different positions she and I met each other here, now, at one and the same place. Mine induced an acute sense of alienation. It was with hers that I identified, with her. She worked at an office that offered help to women in need. I could just as well have worked there. I had been a feminist all my life.

Instead, I found myself at this place in a role that I hadn't foreseen. Oh, how I wanted to trade with her. And if I couldn't, if I really was doomed to this, then at least I wanted to grab her by the shoulders, look straight into her eyes and convince her that we were really the same, she and I. That I was just like her. Intensely, I wished that she'd believe me. I mostly wished that I'd believe me, I guess. We exchanged a friendly smile. She took me to a room where I'd wait for the woman who'd do the assessment interview with me. It was a room where they had group sessions. Obediently I sat down on the white plastic chair that she pointed out to me. She returned to her office. Her life returned to its course, just like that it went on. On my chair, which formed part of an oval circle, I remained. How did I end up in this room? I sat alone. Around me white chairs formed a big circle. Now the other chairs echoed empty. I sat there alone, and yet, I didn't.

I sat quietly waiting when the woman who'd talk to me came to fetch me by the threshold. She showed me to her office. She pointed out one of the two armchairs to me. In silence I took her direction and sat down in the chair. My back upright, I sat myself down as if preparing for a class photo. A simple, cheery, little girl. Unproblematic, free from trouble. With the exception of keeping the warm, yellow light from the floor lamp between us, she turned the light off in the room. I guess she wanted to create a cozy atmosphere, that I'd feel some sort of comfort and ease. Outside, the wet snow fell gently in the air, as if time had suddenly slowed down. By now, darkness struck in the early afternoon. I sat stiff on my chair. A silence occurred between us. I don't think I should be here, I said. I was embarrassed. She looked at me. After some attempts here and there, she finally looked down on her pad. She retold the account that her colleague had given, with whom I had talked on the phone. Had my boyfriend hit me? Had he violated me, in this and that way? Had he raped me? I felt a bit shaken, as if confronted with information that I had yet to take in. I nodded, or I said yes, or I said mmm, I don't know. She said I'd get private sessions with the woman from the phone call. Okay, I said.

After the assessment interview I returned back to the hallway. I passed the room with the white chairs. Always in position, prepared to welcome a new group. In the hallway I laid the blue shoe covers back in their basket. I grabbed my coat from its hook. Ready to leave, I carefully looked towards

the office where the young woman sat. From the outside I peeked at her peacefully purling river. I left the women's shelter and closed the door behind me. I walked back along the narrow, long, orange corridor. I exited the door and found myself back on the street. That street, that same old street, I stood there again, the same grey, cold street, along which I'd wandered so many times. Everything looked the same, but everything was changed. The street was brand new. The whole city was new. How did I fit into it? The same city in which I had once grown up now appeared to me as unfamiliar ground. With my identity reflecting absolute uncertainty, who was I? I was without contours. I was without future. Behind the desolation, what waits?



Another of the Byzantine twelfth-century novels is *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* (Ῥοδάνθη καὶ Δοσικλῆς), composed by Theodore Prodromos. Not unlike the lovers in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, this couple elopes so that they can live together in spite of disapproving families, and this leads to many adventures.

While out on their journey, however, they lose one another. Rhodanthe is captured and enslaved. Although she hasn't now, nor earlier either really, had any room for action or control to speak of over her own life, although no one has asked her what she wants or how she feels, there moves in Rhodanthe a burning desire, a will to live. While surrounded by sea, captive on an island, lost in absolute uncertainty, Rhodanthe suddenly utters her feelings about her situation. Alone at night, drawn back to the corner, a desire to speak emerges. From Rhodanthe's mouth a voice lets its lament, its lack and its desire, be heard. Once she's here, now, once she's in absolute uncertainty.

Myrilla, Rhodanthe's owner, wakes up during the night from a sobbing sound. The slave girl Rhodanthe cries over her fate. She has lost everything: her homeland, her beloved, her freedom. Myrilla goes over to Rhodanthe. She asks her to disclose the reason behind her tears. Initially, Rhodanthe politely objects to Myrilla's request. It would be inappropriate, it would be oh too daring, she says, if she, a slave girl, would speak. Silence is a maiden's adornment, as it were. Rhodanthe knows the codes. And yet, she then tells about her beloved, her lost Dosikles.

In Rhodanthe's words Dosikles is described as beautiful. He's an image of a god. Rhodanthe goes through all his attributes: the face with its cheek-

bones and jaw, the hair, the skin, the eyes, the cheeks, the lips, the eyebrows. As she describes Dosikles' body—his shoulders, his ankles, his hands and feet—Rhodanthe moves on to articulate the effect on her that speaking of him provokes:

his hand is beautiful, but much more beautiful
when it has made advances, moved by forces of nature
(I blush to speak of advances,
but yet I am in love, Myrilla, and what have I to lose?),
and it is clinging enthusiastically to my neck.¹³¹

Through her speech, Rhodanthe makes of herself a desiring subject, reminiscing about her beloved object. After having stated how inappropriate her speech is in a world where she is not given room to articulate her voice, she nonetheless immediately speaks. As if she let go of her inhibitions while uttering them, Rhodanthe makes use of the rhetorical model to describe beauty that otherwise, usually, is employed by male voices in descriptions of women. In the tradition within which *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* belongs, the desiring subjects are predominantly represented by male characters. But here, far away from home in the dark corner of the night, another voice can be heard.

Through her voice, Rhodanthe articulates her desire. Her cheeks blush as she speaks. Instantly, she comments on her blushing cheeks. The blushing illustrates Rhodanthe's desire. At the same time, it illustrates language's connection to desire. While she articulates her desire, it is awoken—her cheeks blush—and she translates it into words.

Rhodanthe has lost everything. Lost to her fate, she finds herself alone with her tears in the night with nothing but sea around her. Now, Rhodanthe verbalizes her emotion. She expresses a longing for the life that she has lost. It's here that Rhodanthe's voice is articulated, right in the middle of her loss. It's in her hopelessness that Rhodanthe's emotion is awoken. With her feeling expressed through her skin she formulates it in words. What has she to lose? Once Rhodanthe finds herself in a state of absolute uncertainty her voice finally finds a room to be spoken. Once she faces her uncertainty her

emotion can be heard. Once she's here, now, her desire awakes. In the pitch-black darkness of uncertainty.

Final exam

MY RESISTANCE KEPT on also at the women's shelter. I shouldn't really be here. I took someone else's precious time. There were others out there who needed help more than I did. I was a fraud, an imposter, a crook. Did my experiences, emotions, thoughts, or perspectives really matter? A parasite on the women's movement. What right did I have? It would be daring of me, a slave girl, to speak. The woman from the phone call was my collocutor. She looked at me. We sat in her little office, face to face on our grey, plastic chairs. Quiet. I probably shouldn't be here, I said. I was reluctant. I was resisting. Then she said that it wasn't common to offer private sessions at all. Usually they begin by directing you to a group. But I had been so broken. I stiffened, I silenced. I didn't understand. All I ever did, all my energy, it was all about keeping myself in one piece. All my being circled around me finding my intact shape again. All I did was search for myself, for me as one whole person. I wasn't broken. I couldn't be. We've all got baggage—my friends said so. The risk that I'd see myself as being crushed into a thousand pieces, spread on the ground, terrified me. I pushed thoughts away. My body was glass. Ellen, you seem unhappy. I held it in a firm grip. A looted store at dawn. To not break into pieces, this mission was everything, my entire life.

Meanwhile, the critical voices smearing #MeToo had increased in number and decibel. Now the consensus marked skepticism towards Cissi Wallin's accusation of Fredrik Virtanen. As I scrolled the feed at dusk, I witnessed the gradual increase of public suspicion towards women who had spoken out during #MeToo. Weeks passed, months passed. I sat on my chair, facing my collocutor at the women's shelter. Every week I tried to determine whether I wanted to report my latest romance to the police. I didn't want to report him. Desperately I wished to be free from the conflict that now was the air that I breathed. Was it immoral to not report him? I didn't want to awaken his contempt towards me. What is this defamation breach about?

I couldn't endure being wiped out. He won. I felt I needed to report him. I couldn't be extinguished. I had to stand up for myself. I didn't want to crumble. I really didn't want to give up. I never wanted to report him. But if I didn't report him, how could I live? I never wanted to battle. I was so scared. I was tormented with impossible wishes that he never would have forced me to speak. All I wanted was to delete our romance. Passively, I had run into him. Now it was all too late.

War is a conflict over the truth privilege, Cusk says. War is an act of violence. War is a consequence. War is the result when there are no other possibilities to reach an agreement. There is no consensus in regards of the truth. Two languages describe one same world.

In her book about the experience of rape and consequently naming her alleged violator in public during #MeToo, titled *All That Was Mine: The Story That Musn't Be Told* (*Allt som var mitt. Historien som inte får berättas*, 2020), Cissi Wallin describes how, when in court, she gets a feeling of finally reaching restoration after years of living as a victim of rape: "Every time I think that this is the moment when justice shall come. My violator is finally sitting in a court room facing a court of law. [...] This trial has reopened the wounds. He's sitting right there and there's just a few meters between us."¹³² Nowadays in media the critique directed at women who had named their violators increased in fierceness. The women were reported to the police for defamation. And each and every one of them would be convicted. One after the other, faced with official and public power, they'd fall like dominoes. "Then it hits me hard—he's not the one on trial. I am."¹³³ I got the business card to a lawyer who specialized in these kinds of cases. I kept it in my wallet. Every now and then I'd pick it up. I'd hold it between my fingers.

I wanted to give up. I was terrified of giving up. I didn't want to battle anymore. I was so afraid. I feared that I'd give in to the hopelessness. I was beyond rescue. I was ruined. At the top of my backyard tower I cried in my kitchenette. I wanted to give up; I really didn't want to give up. I could just place the knife against my wrist. This was all too heavy; that was too easy. Would I be able to resist forever? The despair induced horror. I cried so much. I cried so often. I was afraid that I'd give up. I was afraid that my strength wouldn't last. All these tears, they never ran out? He had won. I

wanted to give in. I wanted to give up; it scared me. It would have been easier. It was so close. I had lost. All that remained was to surrender.

Once she's left her prison for freedom, Cusk asks herself what her next step would be: "You're free, yes, but what do you do with your freedom when it frightens you above all?"¹³⁴ Rhodanthe's released desire, Pasiphaë's sublimated emotion. I sit myself down among the Byzantine audience, together we listen. I don't know who they were, and yet I see myself among them. *Enargeia* is the rhetorical technique of awakening in the audience or reader an inner image, a feeling, identification. The medieval audience and I, can we meet in this shared emotion? Rhodanthe's lament in the dark. A tortured body that wakes up from its coma. We meet in the echo that jumps between the black hole's walls. A subjectivity, a voice, a tone that Cixous' imperative fails to catch. Untenable, it's like Barthes' idea of bliss: "you cannot speak 'on' such a text," – such a voice, our echoing tone – "you can only speak 'in' it."¹³⁵ A song residing in uncertainty's present.



I sat on my chair, quiet, across from my collocutor at the women's shelter. I was so tired. I was exhausted. Spring was in the air. She tried to get the conversation going. The days felt longer nowadays. The birds were back with us up north. A friendly, warm voice. The sun stayed with us longer. I had switched to a lighter jacket. Around me buds were bursting. It hurt me in the chest. Nature woke up again in all new colors. I couldn't endure any longer. This outside, I was so tired of pounding at the door to the world, let me back in, give me another chance. My back was no longer upright. My heart hung to the ground, dangling on the hook that was my skeleton. Crooked. She articulated the words faced with which, now that they were out in the world and reached my ears, I had no further strength to fight. Had I had suicidal thoughts? I couldn't look back at her, couldn't look her in the eyes. I couldn't answer. I had no means left to lie. It was all over. I gave up. I looked down to the floor. I started crying. Along with my tears falling fell my deceptively intact form, Daedalus' mask. Down fell the false cow with which I had hoped I'd be able to live on from underneath the bark, a wholesome feminine being. The walls, which alone I had risen in the shadows of Jupiter's laws, helplessly fell to the ground.

Without saying anything we sat on our chairs across one another. She handed me a tissue. I dried my tears, but new ones just kept falling. They rushed down my cheeks. My white shirt was stained with wet, black mascara. The tears felt like a weightless waterfall. You don't have to worry, I then said. It'll never happen. But I couldn't stop crying. I was so tired. Exhausted by this battle I had lost all strength. It never ended. My forces had run out. I lost. It scared me. I, Penthesileia, your *symmachos*.

For the first time, without any filter, I exposed the dark abyss that had grown within me for so long. The injustice had become too hard to endure. How could he do that to me? I didn't understand. It was so unfair. It was so bad of him. I squeaked. Why? It was so wrong. I had to admit it. I had to accept the pain in which I lived. I looked straight into my blinding powerlessness. Why me? I was gone. It's not true, she said, you're still in there. She handed me a tissue and I accepted it. I nodded. I really wanted to believe her. The gem no longer shimmered. Just take it. Then I looked at the clock on the table. We had gone forty minutes over time.

Yes, you're free. But what do you do with your freedom if more than anything it fills you with horror? To *Die Welt* Cusk says that, "finally at some point you begin speaking to others, hearing their stories. And if you then can believe their stories, if you can believe them to be true, then you'll gradually also regain your faith in articulating your own story."¹³⁶

I left the women's shelter. Out on the street everything was different. I was released. I was relieved, but I was scared to my core. The gates to my inner darkness were left wide open. I had gone down to the underworld. My soul was an echoing abyss. Having faced what was inside me had shaken me. I was relieved: I no longer needed to suppress the abyss that shaped my inside. I didn't need to, because I couldn't. I was afraid. The battle was me. The struggle played out from my skeleton through my muscles to the surface of my skin. I was a posttraumatic subject, whatever that was. I had sought for what induced me with fear, I had confronted the unknown, but once there, what I found, what faced me, was my self.

Viva voce

TIME PASSED. THE earth kept following its course. I managed to localize my trauma far inside me; it hardly got out anymore. Now it only lives in my deepest core. And still, it happens that memories awake in my muscles. And still, my skin suddenly remembers that which it carries underneath. You move on, but in the after. Life goes on, but in it I'm dry bark. An absolute existential improvisation. Outside. I speak to you from uncertainty. I am yet to be defined. My leaves remain to be captured from the wind's grip.

My experience pushed out my voice. My world was overturned. With one breath I was thrown out from it. My voice had me fundamentally changed. In academia, we may discuss the essence or inexistence of female subjectivity until the end of time. The female voice's utopic potential. Woman's language is defined in optimistic terms, as if it did indeed remain to be written. Within the protected walls of the seminar, theoretical arguments are tested. Safe, sweet rhetoric. Pleasurable eloquence. The letters are all yours, take them, make them your servants. Present the text, paraphrase it, describe its pleasure through those big words you've learned. There, on the inside. You're doing great.

Outside, however, knowledge is concretized, embodied, non-verbal. Outside we can't quote each other, but then again, we don't need to. Ours is the impossible text, what Barthes described as a text "outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another*"—you cannot speak *on* a knowledge such as ours, you can only speak *in* it.¹³⁷ Come down from there, come down to our table here below. Bring your glass. There, there, a little dirt won't kill you. Here, have a seat. I would like to propose a toast; here's to the mud that embraces our tired, naked feet.



There's an ill will directed against me out there, somewhere in the world. A contempt. In his eyes perhaps I'll always be an object. In them I don't stand

a chance. Once life as she knew it was lost, Rhodanthe finally found space for her voice. Your voice is a corporeal thing. With her voice she admitted her lack. Missing, she awoke her desire. In and with my flesh I'm reminded of my subjectivity.

I hear his contempt channeled through other men's hate against women, through others' objectification, through others' violence. That contempt is a faceless voice. That voice is raised against others, against me. It says we're nothing. It's nothing personal, it reaches into your most inner core. That faceless voice can be theorized. It can be re-written in terms of male discourse or a male dominated canon. But its wordless practice is harder to translate into verbal formulations. Through the thick concrete walls of the university halls, into the scheduled seminar, it's trickier to get its non-verbal mark of my cheek with its palm. A faceless memory, but a face that's forever etched within me.

That voice is also a gaze that I know. That voice is two real eyes that exist in the world. A hypnotizing glitter, like Mälaren in all its beauty. I couldn't flee those eyes. They drilled their way down to stay forever. That gaze is out there, in the world. In front of that gaze I'm nothing. That's why I know I'm something. I didn't need to know of my existence until I met hostility. I didn't need to seek the traces of my contours until they had been erased. Something happens to you when you experience pain from another's hand, another's sex. I held hard on to the chair at the hotel out of fear. If I broke down I could also break into pieces, made of glass as I was. Shattered. All the while I did what I could. My body was pounding. *I exist* in an exhale. That's how I learned of female subjectivity.

My collocutor at the women's shelter handed me a tissue. She comforted me. She told me that I was still there. That I shouldn't lose hope. I was Daphne, she meant, I wasn't transformed, not bark. *He looks straight into my eyes*, I wrote in the middle of a breakdown, *he sees straight into my cranium's inside, he gets into my soul, he smiles*. My life is a post in contemporary culture, a notification in the debate of the day. From a point deep down in my stomach, through my voice, the experience broke free. Thus the trauma unfolded. The cerebral caught up with my already exhausted body. In but one breath all words lost their old meaning. I found myself on unknown ground, stuck in a place that remained to be defined. Outside, I found no way back

in. My flood was dried out. I found myself stranded, lost among the ruins of Carthage. Barefoot against the sharp sand of the beach, I watched as the ship got lost in the horizon. It was all too late. And yet, in the middle of the loss there was air for my voice. Although I was crushed, I was always intact. My chest hurt, it cramped. But my heart never once stopped beating.

At the women's shelter I finally found mirroring. A softening. Suddenly life shifted its tone. The conversations I had there placed my experience in connection with others. Suddenly I was able to receive that image that my date had reflected that night. Unhappiness. Finally I could utter my voice. Gradually, I had freed myself from the fear I had inside me, which warned me that my truth might not be believed, that it might not be accepted. My fear of being met with disgust and contempt. The fear of the risk that, were I honest with the world, it would see me the same way I saw myself. But I had found a room that was free from his world, his gaze, his language. There, when I tried to reproduce his image of me, I was interrupted. When I tried to repeat his abuse, she stopped me. That image she never reflected. The story faded next to the presence of truth. I could let my guard down. I no longer needed my tentacles. There, on my grey chair in that little room, I dared to feel. Finally, I allowed myself to feel that which I so long, out of fear, hadn't been able to. I don't know in which role my collocutor received me. I don't know if she was a psychologist, a therapist, a social worker, whatever. All I know is her first name. Gradually, through conversation, I regained my faith in the potential of storytelling beyond the big market. My neck reattached itself to my head, my lungs were refilled with air. I reconnected with my flesh. A running blood, a vibrating pulse. I sunk down on my chair.

Once again I had to re-school myself. This time I learned that I wasn't an object. I learned that I was never worth any violence. My body had never been an abstraction. My body had never been a placeholder, filled with air and death, as I had experienced it. It didn't belong to anybody else. It was mine, me. My language didn't repeat the world from which I had been thrown out. In my body the echo became my own words. I had to relearn. Air was replaced with flesh. I existed. That I learned at that point deep down in my stomach, by the metamorphosis that wandered from my gut to unfold itself in my mouth. It was out of my hands, I didn't control it. The exam of my life. There, shattered in a thousand splinters down in the horrendous

darkness of the abyss, I found myself hopeless. I was fused out of time. Crash course in the philosophy of love, did I pass? Rhodanthe's voice is born in uncertainty. Her desire runs through her loss. Through the ruins' echo you hear the female subject. Only once I'd vanished did I learn I was.

Post-graduate

*And I believe that I can lead you to another, a more perfect, world,
where you will be able to recognize so much more,
all those things that in this world you don't comprehend.*

– The sibyl to Christine in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre du
Chemin de Longue Estude*

The original love story

CALLIRHOE (Χαιρέας και Καλλιρόη), dated to the first century CE, is the oldest novel that has survived to our day. Chariton from Aphrodisias is the author-name ascribed to this Greek text. The tale circles around the loving couple Callirhoe and Chaereas. Yet, there's a love triangle in their way. Dionysius of Miletus enters the story and becomes Callirhoe's second husband. Isolde, Tristan, Mark.

Early on, an act of violence taints the narrative. Chaereas, Callirhoe's first husband, has let himself be convinced of false rumors about his wife's faithfulness. On false pretenses, he now burns with a jealous rage, sure that Callirhoe has betrayed him. When she comes to meet him, she rushes towards him with her arms open. Chaereas responds to her embrace by kicking her in the stomach, right in the diaphragm. Callirhoe falls to the ground. She doesn't get back up but stays there, lifeless. She's declared dead.

Chaereas reacts to his own violence, he's shaken. The guilty consciousness crawls up on him, until he finally cracks. His regret is fully expressed when he understands that there was never any reason for his jealousy, that the rumors were false. This, one could argue, lets us interpret the event as if, had the rumors been true, the violence would be legitimate. Right after the life-threatening kick in Callirhoe's stomach, the rumor of her demise spreads; to everyone's great grief, "it was like the fall of a city," to use the narrator's words.¹³⁸

After the description of the collective reaction on Callirhoe's death, the focus shifts to Chaereas, who still finds himself shaken by his previous outburst; he's desperate to know whether he really had acted justly: "Chaereas, whose heart was still seething, shut himself up all night, trying to exhort information from the maids."¹³⁹ As if Chaereas can convince himself that his violence is justified if he is given the right reasons, he seeks confirmation from others that he has not done anything wrong. In other words, it's not first and foremost the question of truth that's at play here, the question of

the rumor's accuracy or not. The rumor proves not to be true, which, indeed, illegitimizes his actions further. However, it's the portrayal of the violator's quest for truth that's in focus at this point, the psychological factors that stir Chaereas, the man who's still shaken from his own angry outburst. The focus is his quest for answers. To the reader, it's clear that Chaereas hasn't acted rationally, that he's made a misjudgment. The reader sees his reluctance to admit the carelessness in his own behavior, that his actions don't originate in righteousness, and that he has committed a deadly, irrevocable crime. The town's reaction, compared with the accusation that Chaereas himself directed against Callirhoe and that made him execute his kick, can be understood as increasing Chaereas' own desperation for other people's confirmation, his need of assurance that he's done nothing wrong. Even though he doesn't yet know that Callirhoe is indeed innocent of the accusations, Chaereas already appears to battle with internal stress and regret from the violence with which he attacked his beloved.

After his actions, Chaereas indeed finds out the truth of the accusations, that there was in reality nothing on which they were based. He is put on trial for his crime. Tormented by his guilty consciousness, Chaereas asks the judges to convict him and deliver a righteous punishment. But he isn't convicted at all. Instead, his regret awakens the judges' sympathies, "everybody abandoned the dead girl in sorrow for the living man," as the text says.¹⁴⁰

This is, in other words, a story of the potential danger of marital violence behind closed doors. The wife becomes a victim of her husband's anger and jealousy. In her relationship, she finds herself exposed to a deadly risk. She becomes the victim of brutal violence. The husband's behavior during the trial, the unwillingness to express himself as having had a good reason for his behavior, in the narrator's view appears as unexpected:

And something strange happened, that had never happened before in a trial: after the speech for the prosecution, the murderer, when his time was allotted him, instead of defending himself, launched into an even more bitter self-condemnation and took the lead in finding himself guilty.¹⁴¹

Chaereas' own regret, just as his own accusations against himself, offers space to the reader to articulate the injustice in his misdeed. Even though

the judges turn out to feel sympathy for the accused man and diminish the seriousness of what he did, Chaereas himself has already worked as a surface towards which the reader can mirror another view of the event, a surface reflecting the idea that the abuse was morally condemnable. Through Chaereas' own regret, the novel gives a voice to the perspective that doesn't deem him to have the moral right on his side, no matter what any court may say.



In *In Assange's Shadows: My Testimony* (*I skuggan av Assange. Mitt vittnesmål*, 2021), Anna Ardin discusses identity and violation. Ardin is one of the two women who stated that Julian Assange violated them during his visit to Sweden in 2010. From first having experienced people abandoning her as the controversy began to circulate while Assange maintained the role of a hero in the public eye, with time, the public perception of both progressively changed. From having been a hero to the public, Assange transforms into a villain. Ardin's honor is restored at the cost of the situation's complexity. Her new high status is intertwined with the media's and the court's respective condemnation of Assange. No one is allowed to be one whole person, Ardin argues. In our culture, there's no space for anyone's contradicting aspects. Yet, life, reality, is oh so difficult. Ardin highlights the need for forgiveness and reconciliation, and for a belief in the human being's inherent potential to change. A hope in humanity. However, for reconciliation to be, one must have a genuine desire to see the other:

I want him to at least try to understand what he did, I want him to take responsibility, confess, apologize and never again violate anybody. But there's nothing that I'd deem unforgivable in what he did to me. If he took his responsibility and asked for my forgiveness, I'd grant it to him. I know it's often said that sexual assault in fact is something unforgivable, but I don't think so.¹⁴²

To see the other and to understand him or her is the solution. Not to point out the sublime, not to point out the vile. It sounds so easy. The ten therapy sessions that the municipality had offered for little money and my collocutor at the women's shelter, whom I considered my therapist, both, at their

respective ends, gave me one, same look, both gazing straight into my eyes. Compassionately yet decisively in a choir they told me that restitution shall never come. That was the harsh truth. I simply had to realize and accept this reality. To seek restitution meant to risk being hurt—if not to put myself at actual risk. Getting hurt was more likely than restitution. Instead, I was offered some suggestions for how I could reconcile myself to what had happened on my own, alone. I could write him a letter, but instead of sending it to him I'd burn it, or throw it in the toilet, or go out in the woods where I'd bury it underground. I could bring a friend with me, if needed. Wouldn't that be fun, I breezily suggested to my friend, laughing, but then time passed; I never made any reality of it. What would I write to him? Where would I begin? How would I face myself and my shame? I pictured how I would wander, my feet against the soft green moss, deep into the thick fir-tree forest. Owls howling in the silence. Deep within, there, in the heart of the endless woods, I saw myself digging a pit. In the pit I buried my letter, to thereafter leave this my life's parenthesis behind me. In my mind, I saw myself wandering deeper and deeper into the forest. But my imagination never got further than that, I never reached the point where I'd return to civilization again, to the world and to life. In my mind I stayed there, alone in the deep, dark woods, in the digging of my pit.

Asking for forgiveness is risky. All I wanted was to reconcile, but I dared not ask for it. Taking that initiative had meant picking up my sword from the ground, had meant saying that I was worth something. I'd ask him to see me as his equal, and I was afraid of the risk of him denying me that wish. I wasn't strong enough, not safe enough. I didn't experience myself to be sufficient in myself. I didn't know how much such an initiative could end up hurting me and the house of cards that I had built from my shattered self. A pile of leaves. Still I don't know. Still I'm scared of being blown to the ground.

Is a perpetrator always a perpetrator? If a victim isn't determined by his or her accident, can we thus say that a perpetrator is? How shall I consider him? My ex-boyfriend? My violator? What word should I pick? Maybe a different word for different occasions? Does it depend on the day's mood? Should I believe that he's changed? Will he read these words and see himself reflected? Or will he see a lie? An accusatory, false narrative? Defamation?

A fiction? His own reality twisted into an unrecognizable deformation? To write someone into your text is a violation, megalomaniac, a sign of being drunk with power. I do not know who you are anymore. Writing you down is an act of violence. And still, this is you as you exist in the fragments that shape what remains of me.



But Callirhoe isn't dead. The kick had only made her lose consciousness. After some time, a gang of robbers who have come to loot her grave find the young woman alive and breathing. They bring her with them. They sell her into slavery. Callirhoe ends up with Dionysius, who in turn is busy mourning his dead wife. Soon he'll fall for his new slave.

Shortly afterwards, Callirhoe realizes that she's pregnant (which may shed light on why the text tells us that the kick hit the diaphragm). Realizing that she is to doom her unborn child to a life of slavery, Callirhoe considers abortion. Plangon, another slave, then suggests that Callirhoe instead marry Dionysius. Thus, the baby will be given a good life. And so it happens. Callirhoe and Dionysius marry. The baby's fate is saved. Dionysius believes the baby is his and raises it in freedom.

Chaereas, however, searches for Callirhoe and finds her. She'll leave her new husband; she'll leave her son. The original couple returns back home, to the place where everything once started. The root of violence. This, in short, is the story.

Now, returning to the dark grave. Callirhoe wakes up from her coma. She finds herself in complete darkness. Terrified, she calls for her husband. Then, Callirhoe remembers the violence, realizes that her coma has been mistaken for death, that she's buried alive. Now Callirhoe blames her husband, not mainly for having *killed* her, as she puts it, but for so quickly having gotten her out of their home. She suspects him of having wanted to replace her with someone else. Callirhoe reproaches Chaereas both for the actual violence and for the injustice of having had her buried alive to, as she believes, replace her. But first, as she wakes in her grave in the dark, Callirhoe breaks into a hopeless lament. She never did anything wrong, nothing that could do

justice to the fact that she is now the victim of this accident. She didn't do anything, Callirhoe says, to deserve to die.

There are different forms of abuse. One form rarely comes alone. A tricky part of getting back on your feet is understanding that you weren't responsible for the violence. I'm working on that. I want to believe what they tell me, what I tell myself and others, my Instagram posts. To place responsibility for the physical abuse on the victim is a form of psychological abuse, my therapist told me; you carry the guilt of the abuser. I know this in theory, in therapy I say "mm-hmm." I believe that the trickiest part is to be genuinely convinced that I don't deserve the violence. It was for my benefit, after all. If I wasn't grateful for the hitting, he'd hit me again. (How do I make that information milder? How do I avoid dragging you down in my drain hole? What meme laughs at it best, makes the truth bearable?) Thus you efficiently get into another person's psyche; no school of pedagogy has proven more successful than his. He held my hand as we walked up along Nybrogatan that night, and as he left my home the next morning, I was long gone.

The flood that Malabou described has dried out. You're in the after. What remains? In time, you'll recognize yourself again in the mirror, you'll succeed in thinking thoughts, you'll formulate abstract questions, associate freely about subjectivity and objectification in a Word document, about love and violence. You'll present text at a seminar, discuss it as a study object, historicize the material, conceptualize it, argue over it. In some mysterious way you'll unexpectedly find yourself on the other side. Suddenly, you'll no longer fear being able to keep living, no longer fear giving in and giving up. Out of nowhere you'll have survived. In some mysterious way you'll survive the darkness and find yourself out of the grave. But once back in the daylight, what remains? Can you jump back into the river? Life's river ahead. Back to your pre-traumatized identity? Is it possible? Is there anything after the after? For us outside, is there a way back in?

It's good to recover: to collect yourself, find your way back. I have a bit more social energy; I recognize myself and the energy I've been missing. For almost two hours, I was able to discuss Aeneas' flight from Troy. Recovery is good. And when, recovered, you remember nice things you kind of miss them a bit, for you're no longer fragile. Yesterday my friend told me I'm not as fragile now. It moved me. You can tell I've recovered. So you can feel joy in the memory of something nice and you can miss what and who was nice. The problem is that the missing is interrupted. Someone pulls the cable from the TV in the middle of a movie. I'm filled with guilt. I don't want to know the other stuff. I don't want to have to accept that the same person who was nice, wanted to hurt. The same person through whose curls I dragged my fingers wanted bad things for me and harmed me. I wish I didn't know. I lament that he did that. I feel guilty for not being able to drag the tip of my finger along his cheek any longer, even though I want to. The pure is filthy, the neat is torn to pieces, nice is vile. I'm no longer fragile. I'm recovered. "You can report him for rape. He did acts of violence. You were raped," my friend said. I answered with a non-verbal sound, took another sip of my light beer pinched with gin. But she said so and my ears heard it and I must live with that. If I can report him for rape it means that I'm raped. I shut off. After encouragements that I'd see a therapist, I called Kvinnofridslinjen a few weeks ago just to see if I even had any reason to call and, thereafter, if I really did need to call a therapist. "It's good you called. You've been through something very serious and you'll need help." I gave a non-verbal answer. I want to shut off, but now my brain tells me that which that inner voice said: don't forget what else he did. Why did he drag me down with him in his fall? My body was nothing. A thing, a placeholder, a jar. His empty jar. Lid covered with air holes, but no bug on the bottom. It lay there on the white flag, white sheets now red from the blood of the fallen. I wonder if recovered means different things for different people. I'm an empty jar, but I'm no longer fragile.

After Callirhoe has *died* she's captured, sold as a slave, remarried. As it gives the unborn baby safety and favorable conditions for a sweet life, the new marriage is strategic. And yet, it's hard to interpret Dionysius' role in the novel as simply being an instrument. Dionysius' importance can be explained by how Callirhoe, when she leaves him at the end to return back home with Chaereas, hands him a devoted letter. She keeps the letter a secret from her husband. Dionysius is Chaereas' rival. In Callirhoe's life, the two seem to represent two kinds of husbands: the (in the eyes of the public) legitimate husband, jealous and violent, and the (in the eyes of the public) illegitimate husband, rational and calm. David Konstan points to the contrast between them by referring to the scene where the rivals meet and argue with one another over who is Callirhoe's rightful husband:

“Chaereas said, ‘I am her first husband,’ and Dionysius replied, ‘I am the steadier’; [Chaereas:] ‘I did not divorce my wife, did I?’ [Dionysius:] ‘You buried her instead.’ [Chaereas:] ‘Show me a termination of marriage.’ [Dionysius:] ‘You see her tomb, I am sure.’ [Chaereas:] ‘Her father gave her to me.’ [Dionysius:] ‘She gave herself to me.’” The exchange goes on for a few more rounds, but this much raises an important question concerning the conventions of wedlock.¹⁴³

The rivalry of the men puts on display the conditions of Athenian women in ancient Greece: the lawfully just husband is contrasted with the husband the woman herself has chosen. Konstan continues: “There was no meaning to the idea of a woman giving herself away in marriage. She did not have the authority formally to commit herself in wedlock. Such an exchange necessarily took place between two males, who were donor and recipient, and the woman was the object in the transfer.”¹⁴⁴ Dionysius becomes a symbol for the opposite of normality. He becomes Callirhoe's husband through her active doing. The new marriage happens due to her intentions. Dionysius' act of marrying Callirhoe brings her fortunate consequences. In this exchange she is at once the giver (of herself) and the recipient. This marriage is a transaction through which she serves her own interests.

But it's only after that kick against her body that this unreal scenario can occur. Only after Callirhoe's accident. The subject's continuity is interrupt-

ed through Callirhoe's *death*. Her life as she knew it had ended. The stream along which Callirhoe floated, as Chaereas' wife, is now replaced with a dry, echoing darkness. A standstill. In one second the future that she had envisioned was but an unrealized memory. Gone.

Now, Callirhoe must construct a new future. In the uncertain present, she suddenly finds herself in need of orientation. Her life post-trauma is a life with no given stream. An unwritten leaf. As her lifeline is erased, so is her *I*. With no future in sight, Callirhoe's identity dissolves. She's no longer Chaereas' wife. She's a wanderer in a strange, new life. Perhaps that is how Malabou might have described it.

A diamond-covered bandage

MARIAH CAREY DOESN'T recognize time. Her negation of time is widely known. It has figured in memes on the Internet. People joke about it; she jokes about it. Wikipedia doesn't state a specific year for her birth. Born 1969, but with a footnote: possibly 1970. Yet, under the laughter lies heavy gravity. Like a nymph, Mariah Carey exists among us like an echo in the mountains. A voice that jumps on the cliffs, is carried by the wind over the swamps, runs between the tall trees of the deepest forests.

In the opening of *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* (2020), the memoir she co-wrote with Michaela Angela Davis, Mariah Carey explains her refusal to acknowledge time. She describes herself as gravitating towards timelessness:

Life has made me find my own way to be in this world. Why ruin the journey by watching the clock and the ticking away of years? So much happened to me before anyone even knew my name, time seems like an inadequate way to measure or record it. Not living based on time also became a way to hold on to myself, to keep close and keep alive that inner child of mine.¹⁴⁵

To understand the meaning of Mariah Carey you must understand her refusal to see time. The book tells the story of a life affected by violence along with a number of factors that result in trauma. Trauma in turn affects meetings with new situations, choices, people. The continuation of trauma in the life that continues. After having described how she was hurt in different ways by her family, she concludes that "something in me was arrested by all that trauma. That is why I often say, 'I'm eternally twelve.' I am still struggling through that time."¹⁴⁶

Malabou's idea of the subject's own chronology, of the subject's self-understanding through its relation to its own future, echoes through Mariah Carey's story. Between the subject's past and its envisioned future, the trauma tears up an irreversible wound:

The individual's history is cut definitely, breached by the meaningless accident, an accident that it is impossible to re-appropriate through either speech or recollection. In principle a brain injury, a natural catastrophe, a brutal, sudden, blind event cannot be reintegrated retrospectively into experience. These types of events are pure hits, tearing and piercing subjective continuity and allowing no justification to recall in the psyche.¹⁴⁷

What remains when the subject's continuity has been interrupted? In interviews, Mariah Carey has talked about how she counts her age in the number of top placements on the Billboard chart. She has created her own chronology, which follows her creativity and voice. The voice thus becomes the life course that she created herself once the continuity was torn apart and she, at the age of twelve, was thrown out of time.

It's not just her childhood that's pictured as traumatizing in the memoir. Shortly after having graduated high school, Mariah Carey got involved in a relationship with the record-company CEO Tommy Mottola, who was twenty-one years older than she and whom she later married. Over many years, Mariah Carey lived under strict control. The huge house that the couple had built outside New York City is described as a prison. She describes herself as a prisoner whose will gradually, over the years when they were together, was broken down. She wasn't allowed to go anywhere, to do anything, or even dress as she pleased. Nothing that hadn't been approved by her husband was within her reach. Longing for complete privacy for just a little while, she would slink down to the kitchen at night, but all of a sudden she hears her husband's voice over the intercom asking her what she's doing. Under endless supervision. Never alone, never free. From the book, interviews and the music itself, it's clear that Mariah Carey, the diva, lived in a repressive marriage from which she needed to free herself. The couple divorced in 1998.



I discovered Mariah Carey when I was twelve years old. The voice, the music, the aesthetic expression, it all appealed to little-girl-me. Mariah Carey's lyrics are filled with emotion. They're literary yet quite hands-on. I learned her melodic stories by heart. There always remained an ounce of mystery in

them. There always remained words or parts that I couldn't fully grasp. Mariah Carey is known for having created a vocabulary of her own in her music. Her own words, made to express what she envisions. A language of her own, crystallized through her music. Her songs made me safe at the same time as they awoke a curiosity, a desire to keep trying to understand them. To me, the songs appeared as beautiful riddles that I never stopped solving. Lined on thin leaves, a truth was laid out before me, but I just couldn't trace it yet. I was still too inexperienced, still not able to read the leaves before the wind would have torn them from my small hands. My arms were still too short to reach them as they swirled above me. Today, I look back at my own listening, and I see a never-ending making of new readings of the poetry that was Mariah Carey's music; I see myself unknowingly practicing interpretation of text. A recurrent theme in Mariah Carey's music is the lyric *I's* support to her listener. Little-girl-me sucked out all that I could from the library that is Mariah Carey's catalogue. Mariah told me I was a hero.

In Mariah Carey's artistic expression you see a regressive development over time. In music videos from the late 1990s and early 2000s, the time during which I discovered her, she portrays herself in different roles.

In the music video to *Honey* (1997), Mariah Carey plays the merger between a James Bond figure and a Bond Girl. In the video's storyline, she is held captive in a luxurious mansion by a gang of villains. She's tied to a chair, powerless and vulnerable. But she outsmarts the men, breaks free and flees the beautiful house. Thereafter, laughing and breezy, she jumps along the surface of the sea on a jet ski. As if a dolphin had saved her, as if had it carried her on its back. A monster that came out of nowhere. An absolute, existential improvisation. In another scene, Mariah Carey dances in a submarine with some background dancers, a wink to 1950's Hollywood aesthetic, the time of Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn, Mariah's big idol, another woman whose persona is the merger of pain and laughter.

In the music video to *Heartbreaker* (1999), Mariah Carey plays different roles in one story. We have the scorned woman: a typical *girl next door*, a nice person who's being cheated on by her boyfriend. We could interpret this role as a representation of the persona of Mariah herself. Urged on by her friends, she has come to the cinema to confront her cheating boyfriend. Then, we also have the rival, a *femme fatale*, the other woman with whom the

boyfriend is cheating. The good girl and the bad girl end up in a fight when they meet in the ladies' room. The first Mariah wins, but the win comes with a transformation of the *girl next door* character; the scorned, innocent woman turns out to be rough and fearless. By facing her other self, the original Mariah appears in a more complex version. To win, she must master her darker sides. Purity merges with lowness. The victory results in a fusion of the same person's contradictions. *Girl next door*-Mariah takes the *femme fatale*'s seat in the cinema, and thus confronts her cheating boyfriend. All the while, in the movie that has been running on the screen, we find Mariah Carey in the third role, namely as herself in the shape of a fictional, cartoon character. Thus, the progression moves from having portrayed the female role as being divided into simplified archetypes, to finally fusing together into one complex whole. In Ana Caro's baroque play, Leonor uses cultural codes and roles, a variety of masks, to reach that which her heart desires. A subject in transcendence. *Your pen writes, you sing.*

There are oh so many comical traits in Mariah Carey's expression. Like a true artist, diva, *comédienne*, she breathes playfulness, combining identity, humor and entertainment. Compared to the early years of her career, during which she lived with Tommy Mottola, now, another person emerges from the remains of their separation. A new person. Then, her look was all about covering herself up, dressing in black, white and beige. Toned down, always under her husband's control. Now, Mariah Carey appeared to have fashioned a kind of bubble gum aesthetic. Transformed. She now shimmered in pink, showed her bare skin, attached glittering clips to her dyed blonde, wavy curls. As if in the middle of an ongoing regression, we could see her drag an ice cream cart into the TV studio, making a surprise visit on an MTV show, throwing popsicles to an ecstatic, screaming audience. Was she crazy? Had she lost it? Little-girl-me kept no track of the tabloids' speculations. Little-girl-me knew nothing of her stay at a psychiatric clinic after her meltdown. Up on my Nordic end, I was just mesmerized by that beautiful person with the magical voice. In my young mind she was hard to pin down. To me she appeared so complex. Like Rosaura's seduction of Partinuplés in the dark, in Ana Caro's other play. As if had she said that if I looked for her, I should find her, I kept searching. Mariah Carey was a woman, a girl, a diva, young and mature at once. A portrait sent out to sea. Eternal yet relatable.

Did I discover Mariah Carey at the age of twelve because in her I saw an adult person that I admired, or did I see *her*, the twelve-year old Mariah, from which the singer never grew apart? Did I see both of them? An unreachable idol, and yet, at the same time, little-girl-me.



Butterfly (1997) is one of Mariah Carey's many ballads that little-girl-me was fond of. It has a classical, kind of cliché message: if you love someone you should let them go, and if they love you back then they'll return to you, on their own initiative. Then, at twelve, I knew nothing about Mariah Carey's broken marriage, of her traumas, of her recent emancipation. All I knew were the songs, all these messages, which to me seemed both deep and deeply sympathetic. Later in life I learned that in this ballad, Mariah Carey sang the words that she had wished that her ex-husband would have told her. She had wanted him to tell her to *spread her wings and fly*, so that she could thereafter return on her own conditions. In her memoir, she writes:

I wrote in *Butterfly* what I had so hoped Tommy would be able to see, and say, to me:

*Blindly I imagined I could keep you under glass
Now I understand to hold you I must open up my hands
And watch you rise*¹⁴⁸

With her music, Mariah Carey corrects that which in reality she was unable to avoid. In her musical universe, reality's oppression doesn't exist. There, she's free to choose her life, to follow her desire, and to thereafter meet his love with hers. Through her artistic expression, Mariah Carey articulates herself as a free subject.

Mariah Carey and Tommy Mottola's marriage was never repaired. But in the post-traumatic life, her own lifeline—the one she constructed through and in her music—she created the possibility of discerning and imagining an equal love story.

The music video of *We Belong Together* (2005) played out in a gigantic mansion. It looks like a castle. Mariah Carey walks on tiptoes on the luxurious parquet. Tormented, she approaches the altar, about to marry an older

man, while out of the corner of her eye, she directs her gaze towards another, seemingly younger, man. He's looking back at her, waiting. By the song's climax, she suddenly turns around and runs away from the altar, away to the waiting man in the distance. She's just in time before it would all have been too late. With the man who has remained outside the world inside which she found herself enclosed, she now escapes her predetermined fate. Patiently, he waited for her to choose the other path herself. In the video, Mariah Carey wears the wedding dress that she wore at her wedding with Tommy Mottola.¹⁴⁹

Nice that everything's back to normal. It's like it never happened. When everything's back to normal, life goes on, which irritatingly enough can evoke an overwhelming emptiness. Maybe it's not like that for everyone, but it's like that for me. When everything's back to normal again that other stuff seems so trivial. It's hard to identify with your crisis once you're out of it. The discrepancy is absurd. When everything's back to normal again you're normal, safe. I was out yesterday, walking, I listened to a song that I listened to a lot during the beginning of the crisis. And then I was back there, but still not quite. How could I have been so confused and insecure two months ago? Even if I remembered that state, I remembered it from a distance. For I've dealt with it, analyzed it, understood patterns and connections. When you remember from a safer place you see yourself from afar, you tilt your head a bit, look at your crisis-stricken self with pity. I did that yesterday during my walk. When you're back to normal, it's easy to wonder at how crazy everything got. Then I rested back home. It's all been so crazy. I couldn't remember if not by telling myself whatever I managed to, a fragmented fairy-tale. Not controlling your own memory is strange; you need to get passed your brain's walls. Only two months ago, I was like someone else, it's so odd. The emptiness increases with the distance. Slowly I then moved my hand towards my cheek, but I wanted to fight it, for it felt wrong. It wasn't OK. Slowly, I unwillingly placed it on the cheek; how small it had been, fit under the palm of my hand. A familiar stress arose, I awoke between my temples. Suddenly, my

rest felt hostile. But I realized I didn't need any adrenaline—and I broke down. It was so wrong. Everything's back to normal; I'm normal and safe. Safety means not sensing threat. Safe, you can sense your vulnerability. I broke down because it was so wrong and I was safe enough to feel what I hadn't been able to feel then. It was never OK. I was hurt, I broke. The battle is over now, everything's back to normal. I woke up in the middle of the night from a nightmare. Outside my door he tried to get in. I panicked, I wanted to call someone, but who'd help me? It was too late. I woke up. Then I lay there, still, scared, unsafe.

When Callirhoe orients herself in her new, futureless present, there's nothing that forces her to behave in a certain way. Having been thrown out of her set path by her trauma, she's no longer subject to the rules that govern in the before, in the timeline that she followed before the accident. She's outside her familiar continuity, far from the stream of a progressive chronology. She's without time. Outside. In this new, uncertain place, Callirhoe fashions a new life path. In the post-traumatic life, it's possible for Callirhoe to construct a life that fits her present. It's after the trauma that she considers abortion, that she marries based on her own interests. She remarries for strategic, pragmatic reasons. However, we could also interpret Callirhoe's new marriage as her way of correcting the past. Now, she marries a man who's neither irrational nor violent. In her post-traumatic lifeline, Callirhoe corrects her fate by rejecting the violence to which she fell victim.



The childish, playful expression in Mariah Carey's aesthetic after her divorce can be interpreted according to the theory of the traumatic subject's lack of a given future. In her aesthetic, we see represented the experience of having lost your given path inside the chronology, that path on which the subject understands itself and its life. With the trauma, this path is gone. The subject must orient without any directions or any confidence regarding its own *I*. In Mariah Carey's self-expression, her age dissolves into a foggy mist of numbers. With her increased life experience and wisdom, she goes through a regression to let bloom that little girl from which she never grew apart. She

remains in the time of the initial trauma and orients in the eternity of this time, and thus, she creates her own time. Mariah Carey denies the chronology of the world. As the world has proven hostile, she has learned to rely only on herself, and thus, on her own temporality. Through music her voice can be articulated. So she expresses that for which there isn't any room in the world. It makes perfect sense that Mariah Carey establishes her temporality by measuring the progression of her music. The negation of time is the meaning of Mariah Carey. The chronology is a story. Mariah Carey's own musical vocabulary articulates a truth.

Callirhoe and Mariah Carey can both be understood as orienting within a post-traumatic spatiality. Both were thrown out from their respective tracks. Both were victims of a violent world from which they needed to protect themselves. Their unfortunate fates fuse them both to a space with no future, no chronology. It's here, in the post-traumatic spatiality, that both Callirhoe's and Mariah Carey's respective subjectivities emerge most clearly. Here, in the space without a future, both can, in an improvised present, act according to free will. Both were victims of their social situations, but in the new they're agents. Only here, only now, on the outside of the world's chronology, the one from which they were thrown out.

Everything's back to normal, or as normal as it can be, I suppose. I don't know. A part of me is still inside my bubble, but I guess I'll get out of it in due time (or else??). I had therapy today after a month's break. I trembled before going because I didn't want to awaken that part—why do that now that everything's back to normal? I knew what we'd talk about and I felt anxious. When everything's back to normal there's no room for that other stuff. The other stuff overturns what's normal. Then suddenly nothing's normal. Everything gets some darkness to it. If you remember the darkness when everything's back to normal then it stops being back to normal, so you can't do that. I'm friends with my brain. We've learned to negotiate and agree on which thoughts to be in. Everything's back to normal, and yet I sit attached to the chair reluctant to leave. The clock shows 14:48 and the therapist must finally object that our time is up. That time is scheduled for me to be reminded that what's not

*normal also was real. It happened. A scheduled time for darkness.
The safest comfort is when someone confirms my reality. The darkness is normal.*

You could say that Chariton's novel about Callirhoe is more than a tale of love and adventure. *Callirhoe* is a story of a female experience of male violence, the trauma that violence causes on the subject, and the sense of uncertainty from having to live in a world where what is normal is anything but normal. Callirhoe is given a new agency, but her new life is covered by fear. Fear to face new violence, fear to die. Fear to send an innocent child out into a world of oppression. By the end of the tale, Callirhoe returns to her place of origin with her lawful husband. Still, she keeps some secrets to herself, and thus her agency keeps growing in the uncertain present. Chaereas comes to bring her back, and yet a part of Callirhoe remains outside.

Callirhoe loves Chaereas. She wants to be with him. She blames him for having wanted to replace her with another woman as much as she blames him for having killed her. Nevertheless, Chaereas' behavior before and during the trial represents the gravity of his actions, the actions that mark the start of the adventure. It's the opening to this love story. Callirhoe's subsequent experiences must be understood in relation to the violence to which she fell victim. Chaereas neither can nor wants to pretend that it never happened. So why should we in our reading?

Mariah Carey's big smile, her big sunglasses, her arm wrapped in a diamond-covered bandage after an injury—it's easy being fooled into romanticizing the post-traumatic life as a state of total freedom, an admirable nearness to laughter. Should Mariah Carey thank the wounds that shape her memories for having inspired her art? What a naïve question. Is she living a dream life there, in her atemporality, forever cheerful in her never-ending Christmas? Probably not. But that's not even the point. Even though *Butterfly* flew to magical, high notes, the ballad couldn't protect her from that which she had endured. Even though Callirhoe manages to fashion a life in safety, far away from home, reality catches up with her in the end.

Time no longer flows along its stream, like it once did. In the new, there is, however, room to acknowledge our own agency. In a timeless timeline, new possibilities emerge to realize unreal scenarios. Callirhoe survived

her own death, woke up in a futureless darkness, and, as she found herself thrown out of her timeline, fashioned her own fate. Life goes on and you must continue, in or outside time. Along with Mariah Carey's aesthetic regression, there's space for laughter, humor, a playfulness with ideas of identity, all of which appealing to little twelve-year old me, and me without time. On the outside, in an atemporal uncertainty, Callirhoe, Mariah and I meet. A terrifying present in bliss.

The oldest novel that survives in the Western literary tradition is a love story. A tale of being attacked with violence by the one you love, a representation of the post-traumatic subject's life in uncertainty. Callirhoe has been handed down through time and space. I pull myself back together, I wipe away my tears. I pick my book back up. Märta Tikkanen's poetic love story reflects the second that is etched inside me. Century after century it's passing on. A second, an eternity. I'm in this second still.

An infinitive dialogue on love

I used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell me: “You think such and such a thing because you’re a woman.” But I know my only defence is to answer, “I think it because it is true,” thereby eliminating my subjectivity; it was out of the question to answer, “And you think the contrary because you are a man,” because it is understood that being a man is not a particularity; a man is in his right by virtue of being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong.¹⁵⁰

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR introduces *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949) with an anecdote describing her personal experience of linguistic exclusion. Woman is defined through that which man is not: man represents objectivity, truth, activity and speech. Hence, woman represents the negation to the objectivity, truth, activity and speech. It is from woman’s subaltern position that she sees her exclusion, and as she puts words on it, the asymmetry is overthrown. Or is it? In de Beauvoir’s view, it seems quite impossible for her to tell the truth from within her skin. Either she speaks her body, and, thus, not the objective truth, or she speaks the objective truth, but only when detaching the utterance from the corporeal voice that articulates it. In her body, de Beauvoir faces a lose-lose situation. But can one imagine her (or anyone else) without her (or that person’s) body?

Woman is doomed to incorporate an object position in relation to man, and it is de Beauvoir’s imperative desire that women must now—*finally!*—free themselves: “to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and above and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood”¹⁵¹—and so comes the massive

stack of pages that bring *The Second Sex* to its conclusion. We are speaking in the imperative, in the potential—at least in 1949, we were not yet free.



The body faced with language, with the literary canon. In *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, 1405), Christine de Pizan describes herself as she sits in her study at her desk, reading and stumbling upon *yet another* misogynist voice that blames the female sex for everything that is wrong in the world. The tale begins with her choosing to read some leisure poetry after a long day of erudite learning. As she finds a book by a certain Matheolus, she reckons that this one is famous for actually respecting women, unlike most of the others. To her disappointment, however, the book proves to be immoral and slanderous, so Christine puts it away.

The problem is that, as she has now (however briefly) read the book, Christine cannot shake off the ideas that it has planted in her mind. Perhaps more importantly, she cannot shake off the thought that these ideas are thus also planted in the minds of others:

But the sight of this book, even this one, which has no claim to authority at all, had planted in me a new thought that awoke a great astonishment in my heart; I thought of how these books may be the reason that so many laymen and clerics feel inclined, using both their mouths and pens, to such mockery and accusations against women and their conditions.¹⁵²

The narrator reckons that this view of women is not singular, but collective:

And this goes beyond one or two books, it goes beyond this Matheolus' one, which, compared to other books, has no reputation nor even tries to sound serious; rather, it seems that in general in all these writings of the philosophers, poets, any orator—to name them all would take too much time—they all speak through one, same, mouth, and all of them reach one, same, conclusion: that the ways of women are inclined to and filled with all that is vicious.¹⁵³

To the narrator, the literary field suddenly appears to channel but one voice, and this one voice articulates a collective hate against the narrator herself. Abstractness turns concrete. The discourse attacks an individual, a reader, Christine. The realization of misogyny in books has her questioning her own worth:

This one thought, in all its brevity, led me to draw the conclusion that my own understandings must have been so simple and so ignorant that I lacked the ability to perceive the great flaws in myself, as well as, it seemed, in all other women. There was no other answer. Therefore, I thus felt inclined to rely more on other people's judgement than my own, more on them than what I felt or knew myself. I was so strongly caught by this thought, and for such a long while that I found myself struck with apathy and fatigue. And against me a massive fusion of different authors' writings swirled, one after another, as I now went through them in my mind. My thoughts were drowned out by that deafening cascade that flooded my mind.¹⁵⁴

Reading has Christine depressed, fatigued by her insecurity. She describes the effect that the misogynist authors have on her own self-image. Their lack of esteem for her sex causes her to deny herself any esteem. She loses her courage and is struck with grief: "And then, as I was plunged in this thought, a great misery filled me with gloom and with a sadness in my chest; I despised myself, as well as the female sex as a whole, a monstrous creature of nature."¹⁵⁵



And, in response to the protestation of Socrates that love is a great God, that *everyone says so or thinks so*, she *laughs*. Her retort is not at all angry, balancing between contradictories; it is laughter from elsewhere. Laughing, then, she asks Socrates who this *everyone* is. Just as she ceaselessly undoes the assurance or the *closure* of opposing terms, so she rejects every ensemble of unities reduced to a similitude in order to constitute a whole:

“You mean, by all who do not know?” said she, “or by all who know as well?”
“Absolutely all.” At that she laughed.¹⁵⁶

Luce Irigaray reads Plato’s *Symposium*. Socrates’ teacher, wise Diotima, is an authority figure. She teaches the great philosopher what love is. Socrates lays the words out at the symposium. Irigaray writes:

In the *Symposium*, the dialogue on love, when Socrates finishes speaking, he gives the floor to a woman: Diotima. She does not participate in these changes or in this meal among men. She is not there. She herself does not speak. Socrates reports or recounts her.¹⁵⁷

We cannot know Diotima’s voice except through the voice of Socrates. Socrates says that everyone thinks that Love is a great god, and Diotima laughs: everyone? Who is this *everyone*? A philosophical treatise meets laughter, a non-verbal reaction. Not everyone is included in the word that encapsulates them.



VARCHI: [...] Actually, I didn’t ask you what love was, but what you thought love was. For I am well aware that normally women’s aptitude for love is feeble.

TULLIA: You’re wrong there. Perhaps you were judging women’s love from your own.

VARCHI: Imagine what you would have said if I had added (as I was on the point of doing) that women also love rarely and had quoted some lines from Petrarch:

“Whence I know full well that the state of love
Lasts but a short time in a woman’s heart.”

TULLIA: Oh what a trickster you are! Do you think I can’t see what you are up to? Just think what would have happened if Madonna Laura had gotten

around to writing as much about Petrarch as he wrote about her: you'd have seen things turn out quite differently then!¹⁵⁸

In Tullia d'Aragona's philosophical dialogue from 1547, *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* (*Dialogo della infinità di amore*), a representation of herself debates in a classic Platonic and Socratic fashion with her friend, Benedetto Varchi. Can you love with no limits? Varchi, as can be seen above, negates the objectivity in any view of love that Tullia may have. He doesn't ask her what love *is*, but what she *believes love to be*. As Tullia shakes his statement off, he adds that had he said the same by quoting Petrarch, she wouldn't have disregarded it as easily. For then, we could assume, his utterance would have been an objective statement. His view as it is backed up by literary tradition. His perspective as it is integrated with the discourse.

Unfortunately, as Tullia then responds, Petrarch's beloved Laura never wrote herself, hence, we only have one side of the story. Had she responded to Petrarch's sweet lines, perhaps things would have sounded differently. Perhaps our entire view of his poetry would have changed. Perhaps everything would have been different, if only we had heard the sound of her voice. But we'll never know.

Tullia d'Aragona, philosopher, courtesan, author, poet. Perhaps one of those women to whom Ribete referred in *Courage, Violation, Woman*. One of those Italian writing women on whom the sun shone so bright.

What should Tullia give as an answer to Varchi? That her idea of love was based on an objective truth rather than her subjective view of it? Would she convince him only by detaching her utterance from her flesh? What would she thus have to gain? Philosophical authority perhaps, but only at the cost of her subjectivity. Tullia scrutinizes Varchi's words and turns them around, directing them at himself instead: *You're wrong there. Perhaps you were judging women's love from your own*. He has got the ideas wrong; he thinks such and such a thing because of his lived, corporeal experience. Oh Laura, please say something.



I said to her, "Even if the female sex is more ardent, and more changeable by nature, nevertheless, as the tragedy says,

*When she is wronged in the marriage bed,
There is no mind more bloodthirsty."*

Her cheeks quivered slightly as she said, "Blessings on men's constancy and the cold good sense in face of passion's fires.

*Why should this upset me, when I die in word
but am saved by action, and carry off the glory?"¹⁵⁹*

Hysminias and Hysmine, they're both taken as captives, far from home. We're back in Makrembolites' Byzantine novel. They need to free themselves from their slavery, they need to find their way back home, they want to unite in marriage.

Hysmine's mistress is in love with Hysminias. Hence, Hysmine suggests that he may charm her so that, in this way, they can trick her and become free. The lovers have claimed to be brother and sister.

Hysminias is not convinced of Hysmine's plan. He quotes Sophocles to accuse women of being weak by nature, of being vile and bloodthirsty. *Amano poco*, Varchi said of women's capability to love; feeble.¹⁶⁰ *They all speak through one, same, mouth, and all of them reach one, same, conclusion: that the ways of women are inclined to and filled with all that is vicious.*

But Hysmine doesn't succumb to Hysminias' rhetorical artillery. Instead, she quotes Euripides as a response, stating that words cannot harm her; her actions shall bring back the glory. Isn't it lovely, what she does? Directs Hysminias' weapon back at him; as she stares the male discourse straight in the face, she isn't scared to own it, and in her mouth it turns into her comrade, rather than her enemy.



Whatever blots you shall see, her tears have made; but tears, too, have none the less the weight of words.¹⁶¹

Briseis, Achilles' prize in the *Iliad*, who is then taken from him by Agamemnon, and consequently, launches the Homeric epic (since her rapture forms the wrath of Achilles, that wrath of which the poet-narrator pleads to the muses to sing); she's essential for the Trojan legend. Still, one may wonder

who she actually is. How did she feel? What would she have had to say about all this?

When Ovid gives Briseis a voice and a chance to answer Achilles for his treatment of her, her letter is introduced by the narrator stating, as quoted above, that *whatever blots you shall see, her tears have made; but tears, too, have none the less the weight of words*. Diotima's laughter, Christine de Pizan's sunken body on her chair; Briseis' tears form her vocabulary.

Neither Tullia d'Aragona nor de Beauvoir place themselves in the camp of those who believe that physical expression can challenge the rhetorical *logos*. In their own writing, they express first their exclusion from language, only to appropriate the same language from which they are excluded, hence, by their own example, they put an end to their exclusion. I think? Christine de Pizan creates a female space in the field of literature, as it were, a city with walls, a safe space for women; there they can exist without being accused of having a vile nature or even without being insulted at all. The City of Ladies, right in the middle of their intertextual landscape.

Alas, Tullia's *logos*, de Beauvoir's philosophical argument, what does it really matter? Their voices articulate not *truth* as far as their interlocutors are concerned. Their bodies keep them from objectivity. So it is stated already by the tragedians of ancient Greece.

In Basilakes' *ethopoeia*, Pasiphaë places herself in a wider discursive context, in the tradition of the rhetoric of desire. As if she would stomp right into Socrates' symposium and start to speak. And still, she realizes that the bull shall never hear her sweet words, never understand the emotions that she expresses through them. He shall never speak her language. The pragmatic Pasiphaë thus turns to hiding, just like Leonor did, just like Rosaura did. Pasiphaë gives up on language's potential in her pursuit of happiness and succumbs to performing the role that the bull might discern, accept and desire. A dutiful cow. Pasiphaë masters the same language as poets before and beside her, but it doesn't matter. "Look for me, and you shall find me," Rosaura whispers in the dark to her beloved. Pasiphaë can whisper as much as she wants, her voice may echo across the land forever, but the bull turns deaf at the sound of her speech. Pasiphaë disguises herself to his own reflection in the water, thus, *finally*, he sees her.

Tears have the weight of words. Ovid's introduction to Briseis' letter places itself in the male discourse by negating the hierarchy founded within it. Her exclusion from it in the epic, the lack of space for her experience and view to be articulated, here this exclusion is met with whatever language remains. It's corporeal, Briseis' language. A physical expression of emotions. It's not a rhetorical exercise, but a need to disrupt discursive orders. Was Diotima ever invited to the symposium? Her voice in the tradition depends on Socrates. Briseis' non-verbal tears also state that Diotima's laughter speaks utterances. It's a disruption of dominating hierarchies.



Many a time when a meal was already served I remember seeing my mother with a book in her hands [...]. It often occurred to me to wonder at this, and as a result I once asked her: "How could you of your own accord aspire to such sublimity? For my part, I tremble and dare not consider such things even in the smallest degree. The man's writing, so highly abstract and intellectual, makes the reader's head swim." She smiled. "Your reluctance is commendable, I'm sure," she replied, "and I myself do not approach such books without a tremble. Yet I cannot tear myself away from them. Wait a little and after a closer look at other books, believe me, you will taste the sweetness of these." The memory of her words pierces my heart and plunges me into a sea of other reminiscences.¹⁶²

Anna Komnene is the first female historian of which we know in the Greco-Roman tradition. The Byzantine princess wrote the *Alexiad* around the middle of the twelfth century. The *Alexiad* is a history of Anna Komnene's father, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos. Besides being the first known female historiographer, the influence of the epic genre (indicated in the title's imitation of the *Iliad*) also manifests a fearlessness towards male discourse. The epic male quest, the male universe, male language: it chants through the ages—and then, all of a sudden, time stops. The narrator gazes in wonder at her mother, whose gaze is directed towards the letters on the page. In her hand, a book, wide open. A steady hand, still, like time itself.

Written into the field of literature, there it is, an autobiographical female subject—the little girl in her material world, in her everyday life, seeing her

mother reading. Alexios' warfare, political strategies and intrigues: it's all still there. As well as the lived experience of the young girl with an high regard for literature, who trembles when faced with books, and who, in admiration of her mother's audacity towards them, looks up at her mother as she reads. *The man's writing, so highly abstract and intellectual*. Eirene Doukaina, empress and reader, is narrated as encouraging her daughter not to fear books, the words of men. Inside the work itself, one could say that, on a metafictional level, Anna Komnene narrates where her writing once began; indirectly, through admiration of her reading mother, we are told of her introduction to the world of letters.



We appear to still yearn for that utopia which de Beauvoir once encouraged us to pursue. The imperative today appears to have taken another course, directing itself away from de Beauvoir's *fraternité* and towards proclaiming the need for that female *particularity* that de Beauvoir, in the anecdote cited above, described herself to represent. Towards forming a recognition of woman as de facto being in the *wrong*, as it were, but that that *wrong* is defined as such only because it is defined through a male mouth, that so-called *objective truth*, or that deafening cascade of many yet one voice, which Christine de Pizan describes. So, it seems that that *wrong*, which woman finds herself in by default, might perhaps not be wrong at all. Is that why Diotima laughs?

It is somewhere around here that I am, as a reader, reminded of my flesh. That I cannot escape my particular position. That de Beauvoir's dream of brotherhood is perhaps nothing but exactly that: just a dream. And that that dream depends on a rejection of the *particularity* that is I, an erasure of the supposed *wrong* within which I find my home and my self. By unequivocally with my fellow men affirming our joint *brotherhood*, I find myself in that sense of alienation yet again, in that recognition of the world as not having room for my flesh.

I notice a deep sigh passing through my throat. I'm reminded of those folia filled with a tired pain, a pain written down in 1405. Within my own, I feel Christine's sunken body against the chair that, as we read, we share. Channeled through my own, I hear her self-doubt. In the imperative desire

for a utopia lies an inherent, dystopic present. Will we ever find a way out from the *wrong*? Could we even think of it, if the solution is brotherhood? I don't know.

Yet, I believe that the female subject is present in the discourse already, traceable though time in the literary field. Maybe the utopia of brotherhood is not the answer; maybe the answer is to keep reading. I gaze upon Eirene Doukaina as she sits by that dinner table; she's holding a book in her hands. Enchanted I watch as she carefully turns the page. She's not afraid. Perhaps ancient texts have always spoken to us; responses to the Matheoluses through time have always been articulated. Rather than an excited *finally!*, I exhale a sigh of recognition.

Kate Kirkpatrick reminds us of that famous phrase that opens the second volume of *The Second Sex* which states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman."¹⁶³ Maybe de Beauvoir finishes her book by proclaiming a utopian brotherhood. Still, through her phenomenological view of being, "every woman is a *becoming* and not a closed book," as Kirkpatrick writes: "Beauvoir wanted to include women's own descriptions of their lived experience."¹⁶⁴ Like Ovid's crying Briseis and Irigaray's laughing Diotima, de Beauvoir turned the spotlight towards the *particularity*, the *wrong*, and thus overturned the asymmetry. Anna Komnene introduces the autobiographical female subject into historiographical discourse. Even, to some degree, into the epic discourse, one could argue. Hysmine appropriates the literary canon that her lover uses against her and responds to his misogynist *objective truth*. Tullia directs Varchi's own accusations of subjective opinions against himself, connecting his view of objective truth to his lived experience. Is it in the act itself, in the turning of the spotlight, that we may trace a sense of utopia?

Barthes' differentiating between pleasure and bliss: rather than being two degrees of one, same phenomenon, we are talking about two parallel forces:

For if I say that between pleasure and bliss there is only a difference of degree, I am also saying that the history is a pacified one: the text of bliss is merely the logical, organic, historical development of the text of pleasure; the avantgarde is never anything but the progressive, emancipated form

of past culture: today emerges from yesterday, Robbe-Grillet is already in Flaubert, Sollers in Rabelais, all of Nicolas de Stael in two square centimeters of Cézanne. But if I believe on the contrary that pleasure and bliss are parallel forces, that they cannot meet, and that between them there is more than a struggle: an *incommunication*, then I must certainly believe that history, our history, is not peaceable and perhaps not even intelligent, that the text of bliss always rises out of it like a scandal (an irregularity), that it is always the trace of a cut, of an assertion (and not of a flowering), and that the subject of this history (this historical subject that I am among others), far from being possibly pacified by combining my taste for works with my advocacy of modern works in a fine dialectical movement of synthesis—this subject is never anything but a “living contradiction”: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall.¹⁶⁵

Petrarch's *dolce stil nuovo*, who can resist such beauty? Varchi takes the letters of Petrarch and makes them his own, for they reflect his view of the world. Varchi is already in Petrarch, as it were. So, is Laura, a speaking subject, hidden in Petrarch? Is Tullia already in Petrarch? From within the sweet new style of our canonical poets—from the delightful rhymes of our Classics—their own interruption emerges. Hysmine responds to Hysminias and the Greek tradition by appropriating it, by making it the product of her own voice. Repetitions, Echo's own words. Boys learn of their virtuous manliness from Aeneas' piteous quest. Varchi learns of love and eloquence from the esteemed *stilnovismo*. A historical progression. Tullia responds to pleasure's chronology. Confronted with history's progression, Christine de Pizan sinks down on her chair. Diotima's laughter echoes through their ages; her laughter interrupts that pacifying—albeit pleasurable—history. A blissful flash of lightning, it makes a crack on the surface. Briseis' heavy tears like earthquakes; their noble tradition collapses. Varchi finds no answer to

Tullia's response. The fall of selfhood's consistency. A constant, if ever there was one.



Along with my lived experience, I keep reaching new understandings of the texts that I read. I sense a non-verbalized grief, agony, an ache under my skin. Shocks are soothed, gently blown into distant, painful memories. Maybe I will never free myself from exclusion. Maybe this ache is the voice of my *particularity*, the *wrong* from which I speak. In some sense, maybe I'll never be admitted entrance to the space of the *logos*, the tradition of letters. They'll never invite me to their symposium.

And yet, as I face my *particularity* open-eyed, I, for the first time, feel the ability to believe in that brotherhood that de Beauvoir wants for us all. For if I ache, why wouldn't you? There is nothing particular about my *particularity*. Re-vise, re-read, sense your pain to end its solitude. Our utopia hides in the pains of the present.

In uncertainty's present there's room for disruption, for potential. As Irigary writes in her reading of Diotima's philosophy on love, "Everything is always in movement, in becoming. And the mediator of everything is, among other things, or exemplarily, love. Never completed, always evolving."¹⁶⁶ Tullia d'Aragona argued that love, if worthy of its name, is always infinite. The mind and body are combined in motion; a woman excluded from language can still love as nobly as can Socrates himself. She doesn't need his invite to the symposium, she finds her own way. She is an object of the lover's desire only if we compromise how we define love. As if in response to Gregory Vlastos' pessimist reading of Plato, Tullia negates love's set terms. Thus, albeit in vain, she wishes for Laura to join the dialogue.

In Chrétien de Troyes' Old French romance, Fénice refuses to separate her corporeal desire, her material being, from her idealist, rational mind. For they are intertwined, inseparable. Her female body is what makes her a subject. No Matheolus of any time or place could in reality ever claim language to be but his own, even if he, as María de Zayas wrote, owns the means of production that determines who gets to be published. So let him make me the monster of his story.

What should de Beauvoir have responded to that man who said that whatever statement she made, she made because she was a woman? A claustrophobic situation. Eirene Doukaina smiles at little Anna's spellbound face. Perhaps de Beauvoir should have asked him why she'd be upset by this—for even if she dies in word she'll be saved by action, and carry off the glory.

Anabasis?

Thus every writer's motto reads:
mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am.
– Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

A SUMMER'S MORNING. WITH my friends I find myself in a sunny Gothenburg. I wake up with air in my lungs. I jump out of the mattress on the floor, run to the others in the living room. A sex dream, I burst out in relief. I could think thoughts of desire. It really existed, my lost sexuality. Could I desire? A sexual being? Could I love? *Pull the sorrow from between my legs like silk. Knot after knot after knot.*¹⁶⁷

Would my cold, hardened blood circulate again one day? Can a corpse be reheated? Would Aeneas turn his ship around? Would I see my inner core return from the point where the sky meets the ocean? Was there a future? Would there be a spring, would the stems one day grow from the dark earth, the earth under which my lifeless body now lay buried in its coma? Dido dies, but she wanders on in the underworld.

When free from influence there's space to question, at least as much as you can. You bring it up with friends, without really doing it. You try to lure out confirmations that nothing's crooked. But they're all so certain, they don't doubt: "no!", they say, "never!", "mm-hmm," you nod, "totally!" They're as steady as the oldest marble pillars. Their integrity is unwavering. You, on the other hand, you're different. It's because of you it all happens. If it's wrong, then whose fault is that? You have a wavering integrity, if any. Not marble but plastic kitsch. You suppress but understand that you carry a secret. You live in a world that they never enter. "I was just wondering; it's interesting to talk about." They didn't give the right answers. You understand you're alone; you close your door and change the subject. But, when free from influence, paths to the brain's shut

corners emerge, forgotten rooms for thought. Back in the secret you bring souvenirs from the others' world, a space for questioning. That's how the end began, they had been the right answers.

Metamorphosis. I slowly turn to marble. Whoops, the crazy magically becomes normal. He placed a grey bunny in a black top hat and poof—shimmering smoke, a white dove flew out from it. From his sleeve he pulled a completely normal boyfriend. A totally normal guy.

We cooked dinner, he held my hand as we strolled through the town. We went to the theatre, walked along the boats by Strandvägen. A pink sky and the calm Mälaren, a serene sunset in the middle of the city. I was in the others' world, unaware that my tourist visa was about to expire. He had already put me in his hat. Now it went poof—shimmering smoke, but from it nothing flew. I had forgotten that I lived in the secret, until he reminded me. Failed metamorphosis, staged magic. And yet the end had begun and I hardened slowly, transformed into marble.

This is no smooth storytelling, no talk-show tears-and-tissues sharing. In her flight, Daphne transforms into a tree. Yet underneath the bark, her heart still beats. She's intact, she's in there. My subjectivity exploded. A stranger remained, a monster. My heart doesn't beat underneath the bark for the bark is me. My life is not inspiring.

But Cixous writes that

it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.¹⁶⁸

Countless times during the writing of the document that forms the book in your hand I've winced, cringed, backed out, asked myself do I really need to write this? And if I have to, do I really have to write it like this? Do I have to write *I*? Always this *I*, this *I* always criticized by critics and intellectuals. An *I* that, even though it's but a narrow, tiny letter, illustrates an entire contemporary spirit, a cultural narcissism, an egocentrism, a death to literature.

Can't I just make that *I* disappear, transform it into a *she*? Rename *her*. Thus might I avoid potential problems and uncomfortable confrontations—my friend advised me so. She's currently writing a novel, it's about *her*. But I have to.

"Text: my body," as Cixous formulates it.¹⁶⁹ *She felt that*, I could have written, and I should have. The *Urtext* writes her forth, a placeholder in which we can put whatever we want. The *Urtext* leaves her in the black hole, in myth. Should I scrape myself off, chop my chest off my flesh? Had I presented her, me, us, in the shape of a novel my life would have been easier. It would have been the correct and proper thing to do I'm sure. It would have meant drawing a rippling river. But would it have been true? Maybe. I have no answer. But this text must be, as must I.

I seek my reader out, yet I know not where you are. I seek that site of bliss of which Barthes wrote: "It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is [her or] his site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss"; I stare into the absolute existential improvisation, "the bets are not placed, there can still be a game."¹⁷⁰

Dear reader, would I be lucky enough to perhaps have evoked *enargeia* within you? Perhaps in the object, as it speaks, you could see yourself reflected. A speaking subject in truth, an object in the story. What the object would say when it was caught by desire for a bull.



Intellect and desire intertwined, an embodied subjectivity. Violated and hurt, Fénice keeps her integrity. In spite of her accident, she wakes up from her lifelessness, reaches her arms out towards the one she loves. Mirroring herself in literature, Fénice understands herself. She sees her situation and fashions a way out from her powerlessness. Putting herself at stake is her only chance. Fénice denies the identity that her culture forces upon her, the one of which the literary tradition tells. If she shall be able to live as a free subject, all that remains for Fénice is death. Her body can under no condition succumb to anyone else's power over it. It cannot give up to either threat or beating, nor burning lead. Your subjectivity is unconditional; it's the flesh. It may be breakable, but it's rock hard. The body's instinct is to live, and so Fénice must look straight down into the black hole, open the gates to

the terrifying abyss, stare death in the face. The world denies her, and yet her corporeal knowledge tells her that she must be allowed to exist.

When Hysmine finally tells the gathering about her experience at sea, about the monster that would become her only rescue, about the feeling of vulnerability, confusion and fear, she tells them how it was for her to be sacrificed for the benefit of the sailors' safe journey. The two lovers, Hysmine and Hysminias, find themselves at sea when a mighty storm puts the ship at risk of capsizing. To calm the sea, the captain decides that the crew should draw lots to decide who on board shall be sacrificed to Poseidon. Hysmine draws the shortest straw. The only woman on the ship. They tear her from Hysminias' embrace. They fuse her to the board, the threshold between the ship-dry safety and the darkness-drowning depth. Hysmine crosses the threshold headlong; helpless, she falls straight into the abyss:

And the fatal lot fell on Hysmine [...] The helmsman [...] pronounced, "Chryseis too was torn from the hands of emperor Agamemnon, but the wrath of Apollo was assuaged and the expedition was released from plague; so now let us sacrifice this girl to our god and sink her completely beneath the waves, and let us save our souls from the storm."¹⁷¹

Hysmine's death is legitimized by referring to literary tradition. Against the ship's crew, against the *Urtext*, she stands no chance. They throw her overboard. At once, the storm is replaced with a tranquil sea. Just as in the Trojan tale, here too the woman is an embodied tool, an instrument. As the story goes, she, a placeholder, could be emptied of her content for the benefit of men. She, a medium. A giver.

In Chrétien de Troyes' chivalric romance, Fénice faces death. Only by confronting it can the female subject arise in its entity. Through death she becomes a whole human being. An agent, a desiring force. From the ashes she stretches herself upwards, her hand reaching towards that which she is yet to be. It's because of her confrontation with darkness that Fénice lives.

As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places. Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman,

personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations. She must be farsighted, not limited to a blow-by-blow interaction.¹⁷²

But Fénice doesn't see far. In front of her eyes she's confronted with her own existence. She sees herself in the middle of a present. Fénice fights for herself, for her right to exist. In her struggle we hear no idealistic promises of a bright future. No she, no essence, not *her*. It's here, now, a meeting with the abyss. Fénice crosses a threshold towards uncertainty. A slashed body, an unconditional subjectivity. A second that's an eternity. In the blink of an eye she denies the unifying, ordered history, she fuses all contradictions to one single battlefield. She subjects herself to the darkness that she, if she wants to live, cannot escape.

Cixous' utopic address hovers over me down here, in the city, hurt and attached to earth. The idea that *in woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women* describes the existence of an essential feminine being, something that exists beyond the words' limiting frames, something that exists beyond a male language. Thus the female subject is described as something that doesn't exist at all except in a future utopia. In the atemporal imperative's potentiality. But, hurt and attached to the ground, I recognize a female language down here, in this very moment, in me, in the body that at once encloses and writes me forth, that opens me up.

Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech, even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectified," generalized: she draws her story into history.¹⁷³

In Makrembolites' Byzantine novel, the sacrificed woman survives. *The place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic*—Chryseis. Hysmine is saved by a marvelous monster. A dolphin carries her on its back. Over the endless waves the dolphin brings her along. Terrified in her vulnerability, Hysmine's soul is torn apart. Then she sees a young man, also on the back

of a dolphin. The man's winged feet lets her know that she, in the middle of the perilous ocean, meets Eros himself. In the middle of her hopelessness she recognizes desire. The god of love has come down to her on the dry surface of the earth; he's there to save her. The body awakens from its coma. Fénice slowly arises, only to be caught up in Cligès' embrace. The soles of her feet are still pressed against her coffin when she now tastes the sweetness of freedom. Eros brings Hysmine back to land. In that she follows desire, Hysmine finds her way back to life.

With her return, the story that had formed a causal connection between female sacrifice and men's safe track is challenged. Aeneas' ship shrinks on the horizon. An unthreatened male universe, a massive earth that keeps its track within the galaxy. The woman's death gives us a calm and quiet sea. Hysmine's existence negates the story. With her survival she forces the narrated course of events to endure a metamorphosis. The Trojan *Urtext* is negated by Hysmine's breathing flesh. Already back then, here and now, lungs that breathe, a pulse that's beating. Story is replaced with truth.



I've never written as much as when I experienced trauma. This text has an alpha and an omega. Is it a narrative? I don't know. A tale that wanders from its beginning to its end. If this is my story, then does that mean that this is my ending? Does it end happily? Did I write myself free? What remains beyond the final full stop? What does it mean to be free?

This text is the result of many notes, posts, analyses, readings. It's a text that varies in quality, form and tone. This text is a mess, just like me. Did I write myself free when I wrote in my note pad? Sure. Did I write myself free when I wrote on my blog? Most definitely. Did I write myself free when I wrote for newspapers and magazines? Absolutely. So have I now written myself free? I guess so. Not once did I write myself free.

What is an echo, anyway? Claire Nouvet reads the myth of Echo and Narcissus and states that

as soon as it appears, language "echoes," that is, diffracts into a potentiality of alternative meanings without providing us with the means to decide on any true, proper meaning. Although presented as the "other side" of a dialogue,

Echo remarks in fact the original lateral sliding of language into contingent meanings.¹⁷⁴

In uncertainty I write my self. And yet, I seek for my trace. Maybe this text is a narrative whose only coherence is its never-ending risk of dissolution. I'm a pile of paragraphs, out-scattered words. Carefully, in a row, I lay out my fragmented self. In vain I cherish a hope that the wind won't get me.



The sibyl is a writer who can't find a place in the world for her voice. To the world her leaves form a big mess. Her thought composes fallen leaves in a pile. The sibyl finds herself alienated in the world of the others. Affected by a stormy resistance, she fails at offering her thought within the frames of as stylized structure. The sibyl leaves the leaves as they are.

To her readers, her voice is now but a long, desperate wail. The reader must gather the meaning on which she has lost her own grip. The sibyl stands with one foot in daylight, one foot in the darkness of Hades. She expresses her vision but is subject to the conditions of the storm. Carefully she piles them up, one by one. In vain she lays out her prophecy. She speaks but without ever telling a story. Powerless, she watches as the leaves are stirred up, abducted by the wind.

Just as her words can't form an accessible narrative to her reader, so the sibyl can't offer Aeneas a happy ending to his journey to the underworld. She has no knot to tie, there's nothing to round up. The pleasurable resolution remains absent. By his side, she can dig up the dark earth. Alongside him she can dig herself down, deeper and deeper. She can help Aeneas down to the land of the dead. If he wants an escort back out from the darkness after his *katabasis*, he must continue his quest. The sibyl is the threshold. When you continue your path back up she remains there. But when you've returned to the shining beams of pure light you discover that you've left her

behind, that she's still standing there, that she still has one foot dangling in the dark, that she's stuck, deep down in the underworld.



Crude and unfinished. As if the drill had just passed through the mountain, only to leave it in its fragmented state. Then the successful novelist loses his interest. While he turns around slowly, my eyes remain fixed on his shiny pussy bow. He's so tired of waiting. Spring has come, life didn't fail us this year either. The sun shines on Stockholm. But in Stortorget's and Börshuset's Gamla stan, surrounded by Mälaren's briny water, the heart-shaped district that forms the capital's center, there the cobblestones will forever be kept in the darkness of the narrow streets' shade. Just like they always were. The root of our city.

Spring in Stockholm, yet again. Tree leaves are suddenly back, they're green and full of life. Protected from the swirling wind, they remain above the movement down here, sitting safe on their branches. Disorder finds no room in spring. In our grey, northern city, these beautiful days don't just pass us by. While living our silly little lives we're instantly captured in their ruthless grip. Bright, pink blossoms suddenly cover the big concrete garden in the center, Kungsträdgården. The endless rows of cherry-blossom trees, a twenty-something year-old gift from the Japanese emperor to the Swedish king: they're in full bloom. *Finally*. If only for a few weeks, the sky transforms into pink fluffiness; we're in Carthage. The sun blinds our eyes as we gaze upon our protective walls. Yet, in the midst of our haze, somewhere in the blurry distance, a little flower's tiny petal falls to the ground in slow motion. It's pink and soft, careful, so quiet—we're not taking notice. Maybe this year spring will last forever.

A drill through a stone. And just like that, all that remains is the sight of his back. He's wrapped in beige silk. Fresh and clean. As he walks away, the fabric moves harmoniously with the surrounding frigid air touching his billboard-sized body. Silk shines like slow waves in the ocean. I want to plunge into those waves, I want to dive into their emancipating silence. A tree falls into the river during a windy storm. The stream catches the trunk; its ruthless strength breaks it into a thousand pieces. The rushing flood drowns the bark's remaining fragments.

The sun's rays don't beam down here. We're about 25 meters under the surface of the earth. Callirhoe's grave. A wind-still cool air. It's easier to breathe. He returns back up to that clear blue sky, to Mälaren's shimmering surface. Hypnotizing sparkles, heartbreaking beauty. Crystal clear eyes, glittering blue. He leaves this rock behind.

Fin.

Notes

- 1 Börshuset is the old Stockholm Stock Exchange Building.
- 2 Engdahl 2018.
- 3 Danius 2018.
- 4 Tikkanen 1978, 78. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 5 Vlastos 1981.
- 6 Dworkin 1997, 126.
- 7 Dworkin 1997, 126–127.
- 8 Tikkanen 1978, 79.
- 9 Engdahl 2019, 28. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 10 *Hysmine and Hysminias* 11.13.2–3. The translation quoted throughout is Jeffreys 2014.
- 11 Malabou 2000, 9–10. The translation is my own.
- 12 Engdahl 2019, 29.
- 13 Engdahl 2019, 29–30.
- 14 Engdahl 2019, 30.
- 15 *Metamorphoses* 1.474–480. The translation quoted throughout is Justus 1916.
- 16 *Metamorphoses* 1.546–547. I have slightly modified the quoted translation to modernize it.
- 17 *Metamorphoses* 1.548–49.
- 18 *Metamorphoses* 1.554.41.
- 19 Mayorga 2018.
- 20 Malabou 2019, 2.
- 21 Mayorga 2018.
- 22 Mayorga 2018.
- 23 Mayorga 2018.
- 24 Malabou 2019, 1.
- 25 Malabou 2019, 2.
- 26 *Hunger* 2018, 15.
- 27 *Hunger* 2018, 17.
- 28 *Not That Bad* 2018, 79.
- 29 *Not That Bad* 2018, 87–88.
- 30 *Metamorphoses* 1.557–558. I have slightly modified the quoted translation to modernize it.
- 31 Malabou 2019, 6.
- 32 Hunger 2018, 263.
- 33 Witt-Brattström 2019, 49. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 34 Witt-Brattström 2019, 50.
- 35 Linderborg 2018. The translation is my own.
- 36 Kjellner 2019. The translations from this article are throughout my own.
- 37 Kjellner 2019.

- 38 Rich 1972, 20, 21.
- 39 Goldwyn 2021, 284.
- 40 Rich 1972, 25, 18.
- 41 McKendrick 1972, 162.
- 42 McKendrick 1972, 162.
- 43 McKendrick 1972, 162.
- 44 See García-Martín 2021, 73.
- 45 Delgado 1998, 7.
- 46 Stroud 2016, 608. The translations from this article are my own.
- 47 Stroud 2016, 608.
- 48 Stroud 2016, 608.
- 49 Exodus 3:14.
- 50 *Courage, Violation, Woman* 508–511. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 51 Bates & Lauer 2010, 38.
- 52 Bates & Lauer 2010, 50.
- 53 See for example García-Martín 2012, 72.
- 54 See quote from Olivares (ed.) 2000, 154–155. The translation is my own.
- 55 Alcalde 2004, 235.
- 56 Alcalde 2004, 239.
- 57 *Courage, Violation, Woman* 2224–2225.
- 58 Vollendorf 2001, 37.
- 59 Vollendorf 2001, 38.
- 60 Vollendorf 2001, 39.
- 61 *Amorous and Exemplary Novels* 2. The translation quoted is Boyer 1990.
- 62 *Courage, Violation, Woman* 1164–1180.
- 63 *Courage, Violation, Woman* 2186–2189.
- 64 *The Aeneid* 1.490–493. The translation quoted is West 1990.
- 65 *The Iliad* 3.189.
- 66 *Aftermath* 2012, 121.
- 67 *Aftermath* 2012, 2.
- 68 Rich 1972, 8.
- 69 Desmond 1994, 2.
- 70 Desmond 1994, 2.
- 71 Rich 1972, 8.
- 72 *Roman d'Énéas* 1845–1848. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 73 *Roman d'Énéas* 1849–1850.
- 74 Systembolaget is the Swedish state's alcohol monopoly store.
- 75 Beyoncé 2016. The video album blends the songs with poems written by Warsan Shire. As I quote Lemonade, I refer to Beyoncé, due to the album being under her name, while not neglecting Shire's contribution to the work.
- 76 Beyoncé 2016.
- 77 Cixous 1975, 880.
- 78 *Roman d'Énéas* 1259–1262.
- 79 Rich 1972, 8.
- 80 McLuhan 1966, 41
- 81 *Metamorphoses* 3.386–392. I have slightly modified the quoted translation to modernize it.

- 82 *Metamorphoses* 3.405–406.
- 83 *Metamorphoses* 3.380.
- 84 Johansson Wilén 2019, 160. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 85 Johansson Wilén 2019, 161.
- 86 ‘Cisgender’ or ‘cis’ is a term that forms part of a certain gender discourse, in which it refers to a person who identifies with the gender to which his or her physical sex is connected.
- 87 Johansson Wilén 2019, 134.
- 88 The English translation of ‘man’ in this sense would be ‘one’ or a general ‘you’, a generalized subject. Since ‘man’ is synonymous with the word for someone of the male sex, it has become rather common to replace ‘man’ when used in the generalized way with ‘en’, which in English means ‘one’. Such a practice reflects changing norms, but also returns to an older form of Swedish, still used in some dialects.
- 89 Johansson Wilén 2019, 172.
- 90 Johansson Wilén 2019, 135.
- 91 Franzén 2018, 122. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 92 Franzén 2018, 130.
- 93 Franzén 2018, 131.
- 94 Franzén 2018, 131.
- 95 Franzén 2018, 131.
- 96 Barthes 1975, 14 (see n.l xxix).
- 97 Witt-Brattström 2019, 12.
- 98 Witt-Brattström 2019, 12.
- 99 Tännsjö 2017.
- 100 Witt-Brattström 2019, 48.
- 101 Witt-Brattström 2019, 48.
- 102 Frostenson 2020, 162. The translation is my own.
- 103 De Aderton means ‘The Eighteen’, the number of Academy members.
- 104 Engdahl 2019, 36.
- 105 Linderborg 2020, 293. The translations from this work are throughout my own.
- 106 Linderborg 2020, 373.
- 107 Linderborg 2020, 62.
- 108 Barthes 1975, 6.
- 109 Linderborg 2020, 300.
- 110 *Progymnasmata, Ethopoeia* 25. The translation quoted is Beneker and Gibson 2016.
- 111 *Progymnasmata, Ethopoeia* 25.
- 112 Sappho, Fragment 31 (the last verse has been omitted from this extract). The translation quoted is Campbell 1982.
- 113 Carson 1986, 16.
- 114 Winfrey 2018.
- 115 Borges 1979, 155. The translation quoted is Reid 1975.
- 116 *Narcisse* 438–440. The translations are throughout my own.
- 117 *Narcisse* 457–458.
- 118 *Narcisse* 465–466.

- 119 *Narcisse* 470–471.
- 120 *Narcisse* 489–492.
- 121 Cixous 1976, 888.
- 122 Cixous 1976, 880.
- 123 See for example Van Hamel 1904.
- 124 *Cligès* 3104–3115. The translation quoted throughout is Kibler 1991.
- 125 Quotation drawn from the interview with Rachel Cusk (2016). The translations from this article are throughout my own.
- 126 Cusk 2016.
- 127 Cusk 2016.
- 128 Cusk 2016.
- 129 Cusk 2016.
- 130 Cusk 2016.
- 131 *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* 7.228–32. The translation quoted is Jeffreys 2014.
- 132 Wallin 2020, 81–82. The translations are throughout my own.
- 133 Wallin 2020, 82.
- 134 Cusk 2016.
- 135 Barthes 1975, 22.
- 136 Cusk 2016.
- 137 Barthes 1973, 22.
- 138 *Callirhoe* 1.5.1. The translation quoted throughout is Reardon 1989, except from when the novel is cited within the quote from Konstan 1994.
- 139 *Callirhoe* 1.5.1.
- 140 *Callirhoe* 1.5.6.
- 141 *Callirhoe* 1.5.4.
- 142 Ardin 2021, 107. The translation is my own.
- 143 Konstan 1994, 73.
- 144 Konstan 1994, 74.
- 145 Carey and Davis 2020: xi.
- 146 Carey and Davis 2020, 74.
- 147 Malabou 2019, 43.
- 148 Carey and Davis 2020, 180.
- 149 See Walls 2012.
- 150 Beauvoir 2011, 5.
- 151 Beauvoir 2011, 782.
- 152 *The Book of the City of Ladies* 42. The translated passages from this work are throughout my own.
- 153 *The Book of the City of Ladies* 42.
- 154 *The Book of the City of Ladies* 42, 44.
- 155 *The Book of the City of Ladies* 44.
- 156 Irigaray 1989, 33.
- 157 Irigaray 1989, 32.
- 158 *Dialouge on the Infinity of Love* 69. The translation quoted is Russell and Merry 2007.
- 159 *Hysmine and Hysminias* 9.23.
- 160 *Dialouge on the Infinity of Love* 119.
- 161 *Heroides* 3.3–4 (“Briseis to Achilles”). The translation quoted is Showerman 1914.
- 162 *The Alexiad* 5.9.3. The translation quoted is Sewter 1969.
- 163 De Beauvoir 2011, 293.
- 164 Kirkpatrick 2019, 255.
- 165 Barthes 1975, 21.
- 166 Irigaray 1989, 33.

- 167 Béyonce 2016.
- 168 Cixous 1976, 881.
- 169 Cixous 1976, 882.
- 170 Barthes 1975, 4.
- 171 *Hysmine and Hysminias* VII.12.3-4,
12.13.2.
- 172 Cixous 1976, 882.
- 173 Cixous 1976, 881.
- 174 Nouvet 1991, 107.

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PREAMBLES

This book, and each chapter, is introduced with an initial citation. Some of these citations are quoted translations: Ovid, translated by Frank Justus Miller (1916); Hélène Cixous, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (1976); María de Zayas y Sotomayor, translated by Henrietta Boyer (1990); Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Miller (1975). The citations from Lucian and Christine de Pizan are both translated by me. Needless to say, Beyoncé is cited in the English original.

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